

BULL IN A CHINA SHOP?  
GENERAL CURTIS E. LEMAY'S MILITARY ADVICE TO THE PRESIDENT  
DURING THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

BY  
MAJOR MATTHEW R. BROOKS

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
THE SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIR AND SPACE STUDIES  
FOR COMPLETION OF GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

SCHOOL OF ADVANCED AIR AND SPACE STUDIES  
AIR UNIVERSITY  
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

JUNE 2009

Report Documentation Page		Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.		
1. REPORT DATE <b>JUN 2009</b>	2. REPORT TYPE <b>N/A</b>	3. DATES COVERED <b>-</b>
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Bull In A China Shop? General Curtis E. Lemays Military Advice To The President During The Cuban Missile Crisis</b>		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
	5e. TASK NUMBER	
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>School Of Advanced Air And Space Studies Air University Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama</b>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release, distribution unlimited</b>		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
14. ABSTRACT <b>On 19 October 1962, three days after he learned that the Soviet Union was positioning offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba, President John F. Kennedy met with his Joint Chiefs of Staff to hear their recommendations on ways to resolve the emerging crisis. Consistent with popular belief, the most outspoken member of the joint chiefs in advocating aggressive action was General Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force chief of staff. This thesis examines the personal experiences and organizational factors which influenced General LeMays advice to the president during this crucial time in American history, and relates the role the chief of staffs recommendation played as the crisis unfolded. Beginning with his assignment as Army Air Forces Deputy Chief of Staff for Research and Development, and culminating as Air Force chief of staff, General LeMays experiences taught him the importance of constant vigilance in an uncertain world. The general also observed a Soviet propensity to acquiesce in the face of American resolve, and believed that escalation of a conflict into an all-out war between the two powers was highly unlikely. The organizations around General LeMay also shaped his advice to the president. Tactical Air Commands readiness to execute operations against Cuba, coupled with the Air Staffs ability to support combat organizations in the field bolstered General LeMays confidence, while the Joint Chiefs of Staff served to encourage the general to think more broadly about the range of military options available to solve the Cuban Missile Crisis. These personal experiences and organizational factors caused the Air Force chief of staff to view the crisis differently than the president. General LeMay believed that the crisis was an opportunity to resolve the issue of communist presence in Cuba, while President Kennedy felt, more modestly, that the best he could do was continue to manage a tense geo-political environment at the height of the Cold War. These divergent views fostered a civil-military gap during the crisis which lingered long afterwards. Strategy harmonizes military power and political purpose, and civil-military rifts serve to make this effort exceedingly difficult. A reflection on General LeMays military advice to President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights the importance of this endeavor.</b>		

15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>SAR</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>79</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets masters-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

---

Dr. Thomas A. Hughes (Date)

---

Dr. Richard R. Muller (Date)

## DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Matthew R. Brooks received his commission upon graduating from the United States Air Force Academy in 1996. After a short assignment in the events management branch of the USAFA athletic department, he attended Joint Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training at Vance AFB, OK. Earning his wings in 1998 as a distinguished graduate, AETC Commander's Trophy, and AETC Flying Training Award winner, he went on to fly B-1s at Dyess AFB, TX as a co-pilot, aircraft commander, and instructor pilot. While at Dyess AFB, he deployed twice in support of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM. In 2003, Major Brooks attended the Air Force Intern Program at the Pentagon, where he served in the Headquarters USAF Checkmate Division (A-3/5), the Joint Chiefs of Staff Operations Directorate (J-3), and in Headquarters USAF Plans and Programs (A-8). During this assignment he also earned a Master of Arts degree in organizational science from The George Washington University. Major Brooks returned to operational flying at Ellsworth AFB, SD in 2005, where he served as a squadron assistant director of operations and as the wing executive officer, deploying twice in support of contingency operations. Major Brooks is a senior pilot with over 1,850 flight hours, including 425 combat hours. In June 2009, he was assigned to the United States Central Command Operations Directorate (J-3), Information Operations Division.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first thanks go to my thesis advisor, Dr. Tom Hughes, who helped me refine the topic of this work during a conversation on a long bus ride between the Sicilian cities of Agrigento and Palermo. Throughout this 9-month project, Dr. Hughes provided invaluable insight, guidance, and mentoring, and always took time out of his busy schedule to provide help when I needed it. I would also like to thank my thesis reader, Dr. Rich Muller, for his assistance and insight. Both of these gentlemen significantly improved the final product and made this project enjoyable.

Special thanks to the faculty and staff of the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, as well as my peers in Class XVIII. The leadership of Colonel Scott Gorman and Dr. Steve Chiabotti set the foundation that makes this school exceptional. The faculty is simply world-class, and I benefitted greatly from the lessons I gained in seminar. Mrs. Sheila McKitt and Mrs. Kelly Rhodes reduced the administrative burden so that I could focus on learning, and I deeply appreciate all the work they did behind the scenes for all of us. SAASS is a great program, but the interactions with my peers in Class XVIII made the experience truly worthwhile. I learned so much from each of you and wish you all the best of luck in the future.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my wife, Deb, and our children, Bella and Beau, for their love, patience, and enduring support.

## ABSTRACT

On 19 October 1962, three days after he learned that the Soviet Union was positioning offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba, President John F. Kennedy met with his Joint Chiefs of Staff to hear their recommendations on ways to resolve the emerging crisis. Consistent with popular belief, the most outspoken member of the joint chiefs in advocating aggressive action was General Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force chief of staff.

This thesis examines the personal experiences and organizational factors which influenced General LeMay's advice to the president during this crucial time in American history, and relates the role the chief of staff's recommendation played as the crisis unfolded. Beginning with his assignment as Army Air Forces Deputy Chief of Staff for Research and Development, and culminating as Air Force chief of staff, General LeMay's experiences taught him the importance of constant vigilance in an uncertain world. The general also observed a Soviet propensity to acquiesce in the face of American resolve, and believed that escalation of a conflict into an all-out war between the two powers was highly unlikely. The organizations around General LeMay also shaped his advice to the president. Tactical Air Command's readiness to execute operations against Cuba, coupled with the Air Staff's ability to support combat organizations in the field bolstered General LeMay's confidence, while the Joint Chiefs of Staff served to encourage the general to think more broadly about the range of military options available to solve the Cuban Missile Crisis.

These personal experiences and organizational factors caused the Air Force chief of staff to view the crisis differently than the president. General LeMay believed that the crisis was an opportunity to resolve the issue of communist presence in Cuba, while President Kennedy felt, more modestly, that the best he could do was continue to manage a tense geo-political environment at the height of the Cold War. These divergent views fostered a civil-military gap during the crisis which lingered long afterwards. Strategy harmonizes military power and political purpose, and civil-military rifts serve to make this effort exceedingly difficult. A reflection on General LeMay's military advice to President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights the importance of this endeavor.



## CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER .....	<i>ii</i>
ABOUT THE AUTHOR .....	<i>iii</i>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	<i>iv</i>
ABSTRACT.....	<i>v</i>
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1 THE IMPACT OF GENERAL LEMAY’S EXPERIENCES.....	9
2 ORGANIZATIONAL INFLUENCES ON GENERAL LEMAY.....	25
3 AS THE CRISIS UNFOLDS: GENERAL LEMAY’S IMPACT.....	41
CONCLUSIONS .....	57
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	67

## **Introduction**

*In other words, you're in a pretty bad fix at the present time.*

- General Curtis E. LeMay

*You're in it with me, personally.*

- President John F. Kennedy

On 19 October 1962, three days after he first learned that the Soviet Union was positioning offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba, President John F. Kennedy met with his Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to hear their recommendations on ways to deal with the emerging crisis. Consistent with popular belief, the most outspoken member of the JCS in advocating aggressive action to resolve the crisis was General Curtis E. LeMay, chief of staff of the United States Air Force. In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, many accounts labeled the chiefs, and General LeMay especially, as warmongers who rejected any moderate approach to resolving the situation.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this thesis is not to determine the validity of this claim. Rather, it attempts to expose the underlying factors which influenced General LeMay's advice to the president during this crucial time in American history, as well as to discover the role the chief of staff's recommendation played as the situation unfolded. A fuller understanding of the origins and nature of General LeMay's advice during the Cuban Missile Crisis may help guide military officers when presidents and other senior civilian leaders seek their counsel in the future.

### **General LeMay's Advice to the President**

The 19 October meeting marked General LeMay's first and only opportunity to provide direct military advice to President Kennedy during

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: WW Norton, 1969), 48; Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis*, Stanford Nuclear Age Series (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 66-67; Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: WW Norton, 1972), 269; Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 83.

the Cuban Missile Crisis, for this was the one time the president met with his entire JCS during the 13 days of the crisis. This was not, however, the first time that the president considered his military options. From the time photographs from a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft revealed the missiles, President Kennedy met regularly with his Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOM) to discuss potential military and political actions. During the days leading up to their meeting with the president, the military chiefs had grown increasingly concerned that their newly appointed chairman, General Maxwell D. Taylor, was not fully presenting nor defending their views in EXCOM meetings. In the face of this growing skepticism regarding his tenacity, General Taylor asked the president to meet with the other chiefs to allow them the opportunity to present their views.<sup>2</sup> The president consented, as this was consistent with his edict that he wanted direct and unfiltered advice from the JCS.<sup>3</sup> The commander in chief hoped that the JCS would provide military options that fit within the crisis' broader political context. He expected the chiefs to be "more than military men."<sup>4</sup>

President Kennedy opened the discussion with the chiefs by underlining the gravity of the situation. Just over eight minutes into the meeting, the president turned to General LeMay for his opinion.<sup>5</sup> The venerable Air Force chief of staff jumped at the chance. Responding forcefully to the president's assertion that any military strikes against Cuba would offer the Soviets "a clear line to take Berlin," General LeMay stated "we don't have any choice except direct military action."<sup>6</sup> General LeMay rebuffed other options intended to force the Soviets to capitulate because they would all entail the loss of tactical surprise, and he advised

---

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 269.

<sup>3</sup> President John F. Kennedy to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 28 June 1961, "National Security Action Memorandum 55 (NSAM-55): Relations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations," National Security Files, Box 330, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL).

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy to JCS, "NSAM-55", 28 Jun 1961, National Security Files, Box 330, JFKL.

<sup>5</sup> President John F. Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

“if we do this blockade that’s proposed and this political action, the first thing that’s going to happen is their missiles are going to disappear into the woods.” Then “we can’t find them,” he continued, “and we’re going to take some damage if they decide to take some action later on.”<sup>7</sup> General LeMay’s first instinct was to take advantage of the element of surprise to ensure the maximum effect of air power. The fact that the Soviets were unaware that the United States knew of the presence of offensive missiles in Cuba represented an advantage worth exploiting.

General LeMay did not share the president’s opinion that action against Cuba would result in Soviet action against Berlin. In fact, he felt that the exact opposite would occur: United States inactivity in Cuba would increase the chances of Soviet action against Berlin. “As for the Berlin situation,” General LeMay remarked, “I don’t share your view that if we knock off Cuba they’re going to knock off Berlin.” The tone and pitch of his voice beginning to escalate, General LeMay reiterated to the president that “if we don’t do anything to Cuba, then they’re going to push on Berlin, and push *real hard* because they’ve got us on the run.” At this point in the discussion, the president interrupted his top Airman to ask what he thought the Soviet response would be to direct military action. “I don’t think they’re going to make any reply,” General LeMay remarked, “if we tell them that the Berlin situation is just like it’s always been, if they make a move we’re going to fight...I don’t think it changes the Berlin situation at all.”<sup>8</sup> The Air Force chief of staff was clearly confident in his ability to predict the Soviet reaction to a military strike by the United States. This was especially true when it came to Berlin.

General LeMay then warned the president of the risk of war under circumstances disadvantageous to the United States. “I see no other solution, this blockade and political action I see leading into war,” he

---

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL. Emphasis added.

intoned forcefully, “it’s going to lead right into war!” The general felt that any option other than a surprise military operation involving air strikes, a ground invasion, and a full naval blockade would leave the United States at a disadvantage. “Because you do [just] a blockade,” General LeMay remarked, “before long the MiGs are going to fly against it, the IL-28s are going to fly against it, and we’re just going to gradually drift into war under conditions that are a disadvantage to us.”<sup>9</sup> General LeMay believed that failing to take advantage of the element of surprise afforded by the U-2 reconnaissance photographs was a major mistake.

The president and the general then engaged in a verbal tit for tat. “They can’t just let us take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and not expect them to do anything about it,” President Kennedy remarked. “What I think they’d do is try to get Berlin.” General LeMay counterpunched. “History has, I think, been the other way Mr. President; where we have taken a strong stand, they have backed off...Lebanon for instance.”<sup>10</sup> Drawing upon a previous invitation by the president for the service chiefs to comment on political factors, General LeMay spoke of the perceptions of American citizens and allies.<sup>11</sup> The chief of staff reminded the president that “you’ve made some pretty strong statements about the intent that we would take action against offensive weapons...I think that a blockade and political talk would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this and I’m sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way too.”<sup>12</sup>

General LeMay clearly held a different opinion than the president, but at times during the meeting his comments went beyond simple policy disagreements. At one point in the heat of the discussion, General LeMay boldly declared that implementing solely a naval blockade and

---

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy to JCS, “NSAM-55”, 28 Jun 1961, National Security Files, Box 330, JFKL.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

associated political action would be “almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich.”<sup>13</sup> The general’s comments provided a direct reference to that generation’s ultimate metaphor for cowardice; a policy the president’s own father had supported. General LeMay verbalized what the other service chiefs were all thinking, and they seemed grateful for his outspokenness. After the president left the room, in an approving tone, Marine Corps commandant General David Shoup told General LeMay “you pulled the rug right out from under him.”<sup>14</sup> General LeMay, feigning ignorance to his fellow chief’s tongue-in-cheek allegation, replied “Jesus Christ, what the hell do you mean?”<sup>15</sup> Regardless of the intent of the Munich reference, it provides a great deal of insight into the strong conviction General LeMay held regarding military actions to resolve the crisis.

General LeMay’s military advice to the president during the Cuban Missile Crisis comprised three interrelated courses of action. The chief of staff recommended that the president approve comprehensive air strikes, a full naval blockade, and an invasion of the island.<sup>16</sup> He believed these actions would rid Cuba of communist influence once and for all, and demonstrate United States resolve in the situation. Reflecting on the Cuban Missile Crisis years later, General LeMay believed “we could have gotten not only the missiles out of Cuba; we could have gotten the communists out of Cuba at that time.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Limitations of the Argument**

This thesis focuses on the personal and organizational factors which influenced General LeMay’s military advice to the president, and what role General LeMay and his advice played as the Cuban Missile

---

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

<sup>14</sup> Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 68-70.

<sup>15</sup> 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Graham Barlow, *President John F. Kennedy and His Joint Chiefs of Staff* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1981), 204.

<sup>17</sup> Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton*, USAF Warrior Studies, Office of US Air Force History (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1988), 114.

Crisis unfolded. An exceptionally large volume of work on the crisis exists, and this thesis is not an attempt to summarize or recount many previously published details. It also largely avoids an extended discussion of the president's relations with the EXCOM or the Soviet Union, because much of this is well documented in the secondary literature. Further, this work does not summarize every possible factor which may have influenced General Lemay's advice to the president. General LeMay's career was long and distinguished, but this work only covers his most relevant experiences following World War II. Lastly, this thesis examines only those organizational factors most pertinent to General LeMay's advice during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

### **Overview**

The first two chapters of this thesis focus on the period leading up to General LeMay's meeting with President Kennedy on 19 October 1962, and directly relate to the military advice the chief of staff provided to the commander in chief in that gathering. Chapter One centers on the question of how General LeMay's personal experiences shaped his views and recommendations. Beginning with General LeMay's assignment as Deputy Chief of Staff for Research and Development after World War II and culminating with his service as chief of staff of the Air Force, this chapter explores how these assignments shaped his world view. The second chapter recounts organizational factors influencing General LeMay's advice to the president. This section focuses on the way Air Force combat commands, the JCS, and Headquarters Air Force organizations affected General LeMay's recommendations. It covers the interactions between General LeMay and field commands, the JCS, and the Air Staff, as well as the lesser-known actions that General LeMay and the Air Force took in the months leading up to the crisis.

The final two chapters center on the events following General LeMay's meeting with the president. Chapter Three examines the impact of General LeMay's advice as the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolded and the

role the chief of staff played during the event. It documents the president's expectations for the JCS and the decision-making process in the Kennedy Administration. It covers the ways in which President Kennedy considered his top Airman's advice as the crisis deepened, and General LeMay's specific role in the crisis. A final chapter concludes with a synthesis of the major issues raised in the thesis. It reflects on the divide between the civil and military leaders in the crisis and discusses the ways experiences and organizations shape individual decision-making. This final chapter serves to recognize the barriers one may discover when practicing the art of strategy.

### **Implications**

General LeMay believed that his primary responsibility as chief of staff was "to inform the secretary of defense and the president of any circumstance or situation coming within my cognizance that I consider critical to the security of the country."<sup>18</sup> What factors influenced the ways General LeMay met these responsibilities, and what are the implications for future military leaders? This thesis reveals that both personal experiences and organizational factors guided General LeMay and suggests these factors will affect the recommendations of senior military officers in future crises. It also reveals the challenges of providing military advice during a crisis, especially as many voices compete for the ear of senior decision-makers. To be most effective in the future, senior Air Force leaders need to understand the way military organizations and personal experiences might influence specific policy recommendations, and the ways in which their advice may be perceived by civil leaders. Perhaps most importantly, careful reflection about General LeMay's experiences in October 1962 might help future leaders avoid civil-military gaps so harmful to the formulation of strategy. In the twenty-first century, military officers and politicians will most certainly

---

<sup>18</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, chief of staff, US Air Force, Box B154, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



find themselves dealing with national security crises in tandem. To borrow from President Kennedy, leaders from each side will be in it together, personally.

## Chapter One

### The Impact of General LeMay's Experiences

*History has, I think, been the other way Mr. President...where we have taken a strong stand, they have backed off. I don't share your view that if we knock off Cuba they're going to knock off Berlin...if we don't do anything to Cuba, then they're going to push on Berlin, and push real hard because they've got us on the run.*

- General Curtis E. LeMay

General LeMay's rebuttal of the president during the 19 October meeting reveals a high level of confidence in his assessment of potential Soviet responses to American military action in Cuba. This confidence was the product of both his character and his experiences. Scholars suggest experiences strongly shape perceptions, and past events are most influential when experiences are firsthand, exert direct influence, and are of major consequence.<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores the experiences that bore on General LeMay's military advice to the president during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

### World War II Aftermath: Uncertain World, Certain Responsibilities

General LeMay's assignment to Washington DC after World War II was a long way away from the battlefields, but his new post as Deputy Chief of Staff for Research and Development offered the opportunity to see an uncertain world develop from afar. This posting also allowed him to gain a great deal of insight into previously unknown enemy technical capabilities. In this position, General LeMay directed and supervised the Army Air Forces' applied research, development, and test programming, and part of his duties entailed getting German scientists like Wernher von Braun involved with American military projects.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 217 and 235.

<sup>2</sup> Martin J. Collins, *Cold War Laboratory: RAND, the Air Force, and the American State, 1945-1950*, Smithsonian History of Aviation and Spaceflight Series (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution

duty, General LeMay began to comprehend the ease with which the United States could fall behind other nations in technological terms, which in turn posed a threat for the future unless the country remained vigilant.<sup>3</sup> General LeMay began to deduce the importance of maintaining American military strength to counter threats to the nation.

In October 1946, General LeMay delivered a speech in Ohio that underscored his concern about a dangerous world. He opened the address lamenting that “certainly conditions today are not what we hoped they would be a year after our victory over aggression.” Post-war world events had given “thinking citizens cause for concern,” and made one “wonder if we have seen the last of aggression in the world.” Although the war had been over for a year, the Paris conference had not yet resulted in any peace treaties and General LeMay wondered “if their work will really give us peace or another Versailles treaty.” This skepticism, however, gave way to a glimmer of optimism. “I do not believe that the world must regard another major war as inevitable,” he concluded, and he called for a better state of international relations.<sup>4</sup>

Six months after his remarks in Ohio, General LeMay’s concerns had grown. President Truman had just pledged America’s support for the free peoples of the world against totalitarian regimes, and committed the United States to responsibilities across the globe.<sup>5</sup> General LeMay felt that the Truman Doctrine, as it became known, “compels us to examine very carefully the international situation in which we find ourselves and to examine even more carefully our own capabilities for the

---

Press, 2002), 37; Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 398-399.

<sup>3</sup> LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 397-398.

<sup>4</sup> Major General Curtis E. LeMay, “Military Science and National Security,” (address, Cleveland, OH, 8 October 1946), Box B44, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>5</sup> President Harry S. Truman, “Reading copy of message to Congress re: Greece and Turkey,” (address, Washington, DC, 12 March 1947), 1945-1953 Presidential Speeches-Originals, Speech File, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

role in which we are cast.”<sup>6</sup> The general expressed dissatisfaction over the tension in the international environment and believed post-war conferences had produced little more than diplomatic squabbles.<sup>7</sup> General LeMay mentioned that these tensions had caused many people to realize “for the first time that our national responsibilities and interests are no longer narrow or restricted, but are world-wide in every sense of the word.”<sup>8</sup>

These new American responsibilities and his assignment in research and development provide a backdrop against which to track General LeMay’s emerging beliefs regarding American military strength. His experiences with German scientists reinforced convictions about technology and vulnerabilities to the United States.<sup>9</sup> The realization that America had been “at least 10 years behind the Germans” in aeronautics and missiles meant that the country could be vulnerable and should bolster its military capabilities.<sup>10</sup> The general also felt that advances in aircraft technology negated the geographical security upon which the United States had heretofore based much of its security. Furthermore, he believed the destructive power of atomic weapons could not be understated.<sup>11</sup> As the country most responsible for the defeat of aggressor nations in both World War I and World War II, America was now more susceptible to attack by aggressors than she had been in the past.<sup>12</sup> This awareness caused General LeMay to assert “it has become increasingly evident that military weakness pays no greater dividends for peace than does political appeasement...peace cannot be bought with

---

<sup>6</sup> Major General Curtis E. LeMay, “Remarks Scheduled for 11 April 1947,” (address, Washington, DC, 11 April 1947), Box B44, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>7</sup> LeMay, “Remarks Scheduled for 11 April 1947,” 11 April 1947, Box B44, LeMay Papers.

<sup>8</sup> LeMay, “Remarks Scheduled for 11 April 1947,” 11 April 1947, Box B44, LeMay Papers.

<sup>9</sup> LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 397.

<sup>10</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by John T. Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 4, K239.0512-736, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL (AFHRA).

<sup>11</sup> LeMay, “Remarks Scheduled for 11 April 1947,” 11 April 1947, Box B44, LeMay Papers.

<sup>12</sup> LeMay, “Military Science and National Security,” 8 October 1946, Box B44, LeMay Papers.

weakness...it must be assured by strength.”<sup>13</sup> General LeMay’s next assignment reinforced these foundational beliefs.

### **The Berlin Airlift: Face to Face with the Soviets**

General LeMay’s subsequent assignment as Commander of United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) lasted just a year, but the experiences gained there endured a lifetime. When he arrived in Germany, the general took command of a small force faced with great responsibilities. The occupation plan for Germany following World War II had created a divided Berlin over 100 miles inside Soviet-controlled territory, and the United States and Britain maintained responsibility for the Western half of that city. Any Soviet interference with American or British ground traffic into West Berlin would create challenges for General LeMay. The United States had reduced its military strength after World War II but the Soviets, who controlled East Berlin, had not done the same.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the United States was committed to West Berlin. The Marshall Plan promised economic assistance to Europe, and consistent with the Truman Doctrine, a growing concern over perceived Soviet efforts to dominate Germany solidified America’s long-term commitment to the area.<sup>15</sup> Given that the United States was in Berlin by formal agreement, President Truman held the conviction that the Soviets had no right to push the American forces out.<sup>16</sup> The United States would not abandon Berlin. This set the stage for the Berlin Airlift, which served as General LeMay’s first direct encounter with the Soviets after the war.

In early 1948, five months into his tour as USAFE commander, General LeMay faced the first of several Soviet challenges as the communists stepped up pressure to limit Western ground access to Berlin. Faced with a potential conflict at any time due to Soviet actions,

---

<sup>13</sup> LeMay, “Remarks Scheduled for 11 April 1947,” 11 April 1947, Box B44, LeMay Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas M. Coffey, *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 258.

<sup>15</sup> Roger G. Miller, *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, *To Save a City*, 56.

General LeMay realized that he “needed to shake things up right quick” and prepare his forces for a possible short-notice fight.<sup>17</sup> He began building up the combat capability of USAFE forces, which consisted of a tactical fighter group, two troop carrier groups, a photoreconnaissance squadron, and two B-29 groups General LeMay had requested from the United States. Before General LeMay completed his preparations, however, tensions came to a head. In April 1948, the Soviets began using their Yak fighters to harass western aircraft flying in the established air corridors into West Berlin. One of these flights resulted in a mid-air collision between a Soviet fighter and an English passenger airliner, leaving ten Britons dead. After this incident, the United States and its allies formulated a military response that would demonstrate their resolve and commitment. Fighter aircraft began to escort all western military transport planes resupplying West Berlin. In light of this forceful action, the Soviets reversed their position on the sanctity of aircraft flying into the city.<sup>18</sup> General LeMay must have taken notice of the Soviet reaction to this show of military force. He began to believe that a firm military response could cow the Soviets.<sup>19</sup>

General LeMay’s view that the Soviets would back off in the face of military assertion was never again tested during his time in Europe. Emboldened by Soviet acquiescence, General LeMay and army leadership had planned an assertive operation to drive a large supply convoy on the Autobahn through East Germany into Berlin to test Soviet resolve. Higher headquarters vetoed the plan as too aggressive, but General LeMay believed had the plan led to conflict, “we probably could have done a good job of cleaning out their air force with one blow with what we had using the B-29s as well as fighters.”<sup>20</sup> More than two decades later, General LeMay continued to believe the operation would have opened up

---

<sup>17</sup> LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 411.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, *To Save a City*, 25-26.

<sup>19</sup> LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 416.

<sup>20</sup> LeMay, interview by Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 14.

the Autobahn. “They wouldn’t let us do it,” the general remarked, “and I think, Monday morning quarterbacking after it was all over, that if we had done it we would have gone right up there and opened [the Autobahn] up and there would have been no resistance.”<sup>21</sup>

A short time after the April 1948 incident, General LeMay began building the initial plans for the protracted aerial resupply of Berlin. The USAFE commander’s Berlin Airlift plan called for the use of 236 C-54 and C-47 aircraft to deliver 3,515 short tons of supplies daily into the city.<sup>22</sup> The plan noted several factors that might bear on the outcome of the operation, including aircraft maintenance, weather, payload difficulties, and manpower to support the lift, but tellingly, not Soviet interference.<sup>23</sup> Already General LeMay had formulated important conclusions about Soviet military inclinations.

The general’s tour as USAFE Commander brought him face to face with the Soviets, and these encounters taught him lessons for the future. First and foremost, he realized the Soviets possessed a large military force that was rapidly becoming a threat to the West. General LeMay believed the size and strength of the Soviet military force “scared” both military leaders in Germany and political leaders in Washington, a realization which served to reinforce the general’s belief that American military strength was paramount and the key to world peace.<sup>24</sup> The experience also demonstrated that strong displays of force would cause the Soviets to capitulate, especially as it related to air operations. “You’d think that we might have been driven to drink by the Russians constantly buzzing our airplanes,” the general remarked, “actually they didn’t bother us much...once they discovered that we were firmly

---

<sup>21</sup> LeMay, interview by Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Lieutenant General Curtis E. LeMay, commander, United States Air Forces in Europe, to General Lucius Clay, Military Governor for the US Zone in Germany, memorandum, 9 September 1948, “Plan for Protracted Airlift to Berlin,” Box B45, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>23</sup> LeMay to Clay, “Plan for Protracted Airlift to Berlin,” 9 September 1948, Box B45, LeMay Papers.

<sup>24</sup> LeMay, interview by Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 9.

intentioned...they let us pretty much alone.”<sup>25</sup> In General LeMay’s mind, firm response would lead to Soviet capitulation. Armed with the resolve that military strength was the key to peace and a firsthand knowledge of Soviet reactions in tense situations, General LeMay left Germany to assume command of Strategic Air Command (SAC).

### **SAC Commander: Building the Force amidst Changing Reality**

General LeMay’s experience as SAC commander served to reinforce many of his existing beliefs, but also presented him with opportunities to reassess his views of warfare in the nuclear age. The prevailing political and military thought as the general assumed command of SAC was that the United States military was in woeful shape and ill-prepared to counter the emerging Soviet military threat.<sup>26</sup> General LeMay remarked that Americans were “shaken up considerably by the attitude of the Russians, that they weren’t really our allies or friends; that we had to do something about defense.”<sup>27</sup> During his nearly ten years in command of SAC, General LeMay took action to alleviate these concerns. He transformed the command into a world-class force that was ready to fight at a moment’s notice. He accomplished this task as the Soviet Union worked to achieve nuclear parity with the United States. The general also witnessed a limited war in Korea which influenced his thinking about the nature of war in the nuclear age. These personal experiences played a major role in formulating his views.

General LeMay assumed command of SAC with instructions from General Hoyt Vandenberg, Air Force chief of staff, to get his force into fighting shape as rapidly as possible.<sup>28</sup> This guidance was consistent with General LeMay’s own convictions about the importance of military strength. He believed that to be most effective, SAC forces needed to be ready to fight at a moment’s notice. At the outset of World War II,

---

<sup>25</sup> LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 416.

<sup>26</sup> Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 268.

<sup>27</sup> LeMay, interview by Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 14.

<sup>28</sup> LeMay, interview by Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 14-15.



General LeMay struggled to get his squadron prepared to deploy on short notice, and he vowed not to allow that to happen to SAC. He thought “the best way to maintain peace was to build the strongest and most professional force the world had ever seen to be ready, by God, today to fight in case we had to; not tomorrow or next month, right now.”<sup>29</sup>

General LeMay’s personal goal was to build SAC into a military organization that was so strong that no country would dare attack the United States.<sup>30</sup> The world situation in 1948 was a “loose, slippery, fragile pile of broken crockery,” and General LeMay wanted to get everyone in SAC in the frame of mind that they were “at war now.”<sup>31</sup>

One year later, the ability to fight immediately became more important as the Soviets joined the club of nuclear-capable states. The impact of the Soviet Union’s test of its first nuclear weapon on 29 August 1949 had far-reaching affect on the United States, the Air Force, and SAC. General LeMay asserted that the Soviet nuclear capability “changed the thinking of the whole Air Force.”<sup>32</sup> Until the Soviet nuclear test, SAC officers based their thinking on the notion that only the United States possessed the bomb. This meant SAC plans called for simply “hauling the bombs over there and hitting the target and not [thinking] too much about any defense that [the Soviets] might put up of their country” because they had no capability to hit the United States.<sup>33</sup>

But once the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons, and with them the ability to destroy America quickly, General LeMay shifted SAC war plans and objectives. Heretofore, SAC’s primary goal in any war with the Soviet Union had centered on destroying the adversary’s war-making capability, but now Soviet nuclear missiles and aircraft became important objectives as well. As the Soviets built up their long-range

---

<sup>29</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Robert M. Kipp and John T. Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 6, K239.0512-1774, AFHRA.

<sup>30</sup> LeMay, interview by Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 12.

<sup>31</sup> LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 436.

<sup>32</sup> LeMay, interview by Kipp and Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 4.

<sup>33</sup> LeMay, interview by Kipp and Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 14.

strike programs to support their nuclear capability, the threat to the United States' homeland became ever more real. General LeMay concluded that SAC needed to make the destruction of Soviet fielded forces, especially their Air Force, the first priority in order to prevent an attack on the United States.<sup>34</sup> The United States was now at risk of complete destruction via nuclear weapons, and the first priority in any conflict with the Soviets must be to eliminate their capability to strike the American homeland--as quickly as humanly and technically possible.<sup>35</sup>

Just as the new Soviet nuclear capability altered General LeMay's thinking about the magnitude of the threat to the United States, the war in Korea changed his perceptions regarding political prerogatives in warfare. As the Korean War broke out, General LeMay suggested SAC firebomb North Korean cities, much like the Army Air Forces units under his command had done in World War II.<sup>36</sup> General LeMay believed this strategy would end the war in the early stages and would minimize casualties on both sides. Political leaders rejected this plan outright and General LeMay felt that this was a mistake. "As a net result over the four years that we fought in North Korea," he recalled, "we burned down every town in North Korea and South Korea too." In the end, the general simply could not understand why it was acceptable to kill nearly twenty percent of the Korean population slowly instead of killing fewer people more quickly.<sup>37</sup> The realities of the Korean War served to reinforce General LeMay's beliefs about the importance of unrestricted force at the beginning of a conflict, but he also became intimately aware of the reality of political constraints on warfare in the nuclear age.

The major political constraint that General LeMay began to observe centered on the use of nuclear weapons in warfare. General LeMay did

---

<sup>34</sup> LeMay, interview by Kipp and Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 14-15.

<sup>35</sup> This was an early shift in the counter-value and counter force targeting philosophy that dominated SAC's war plans for forty years.

<sup>36</sup> LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 458.

<sup>37</sup> LeMay, interview by Kipp and Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 45-46.

not push for the use of nuclear weapons in the early stages of the Korean conflict, but he was not against using these weapons in certain scenarios. The general believed that using nuclear weapons was simply the most efficient way to achieve military objectives while limiting the duration of the conflict. "I don't believe," he once said, "the fact that we use one nuclear weapon means we that we have to automatically explode every nuclear weapon in the world...I looked at it as just another weapon system of war."<sup>38</sup> Yet, the general recognized that there was an unease regarding the use of nuclear weapons. Because of this, he realized that the only time he could realistically advocate for the use of nuclear weapons was as a matter of last resort in defense of the United States.<sup>39</sup> For General LeMay, political constraints on the use of nuclear weapons were here to stay, and he accepted that fact.

General LeMay also adopted important ideas about limited war and escalation while at SAC.<sup>40</sup> In April 1957, he opined America "would never engage in a limited war except against a proxy state of the Soviet Union" and went on to ask "what nation would engage in limited war with the United States without Soviet backing?" In his mind, limited war would always occur against a proxy of the Soviet Union, and no such war would expand to general conflict unless the consequences of defeat threatened Soviet survival. The general believed that "regardless of the weapons used or targets struck, limited war will not expand into general war unless the Soviet Union refuses to accept the defeat of its proxy, and is not deterred by our general war posture."<sup>41</sup> This would be central to his thinking years later during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

---

<sup>38</sup> LeMay, interview by Kipp and Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 47.

<sup>39</sup> LeMay, interview by Kipp and Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 48.

<sup>40</sup> Charles H. Hildreth, *USAF Logistics Preparations for Limited War: 1958-1961* (Washington, DC: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 1962), 1, K168.01-8, AFHRA. Document is declassified. In this thesis, Limited War refers to "any armed conflict short of an overt engagement of US and USSR forces which has been directed or concurred in by competent political authority."

<sup>41</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, "Air Force Policy Pertaining to Limited War," (address, 9 April 1957), Box B71, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

What did General LeMay's nearly ten years as SAC commander teach him? First, it reinforced the necessity of a strong military force to quickly defeat any threat. The entrance of the Soviet Union into the nuclear club ushered in a new reality where the United States faced, for the first time, threats to the homeland that could endanger its national survival in short order. The Korean conflict highlighted the political constraints on warfare in the nuclear age, and underscored civilian reluctance to use nuclear weapons. Despite this, the general maintained that in the nuclear age, the risk of a limited conflict growing into a general war was low unless the consequences of a loss were extremely high. This conviction is perhaps why General LeMay stated in April 1957 that "in any war in which the United States becomes engaged, the Air Force will urge the employment of our best weapons in whatever strength deemed necessary to achieve prompt, favorable decision."<sup>42</sup> This feeling would not change significantly in his next assignment to the Pentagon.

### **The Pentagon: Limited Conflict and Escalation**

In July 1957 General LeMay made the last of many permanent changes of station during his long career, and this final assignment to the Pentagon, first as Vice Chief and later as Chief of Staff, served to refine many of the views he gained during his previous assignments in the field. As he arrived in Washington, the Air Force was embroiled in the middle of an interservice controversy regarding the proper allocation of military force to face Soviet threats. The next year, the United States intervened to support the pro-Western government in Lebanon against insurgent anti-Western forces. The Lebanon incident apparently made such an impression on General LeMay that he specifically mentioned it to the president during their 19 October meeting as an example where a strong stand by the United States had caused the Soviets to backpedal. These events in the immediate years preceding the Cuban Missile Crisis

---

<sup>42</sup> LeMay, "Air Force Policy Pertaining to Limited War," 9 April 1957, Box B71, LeMay Papers.

provide a final opportunity to gain insight on how General LeMay's experiences shaped his recommendations to the president during October 1962.

Service infighting regarding the proper way to deal with the ever-increasing Soviet threat marked General LeMay's first few months as Vice Chief of Staff, and this rivalry seems to have hardened his views on the issue. By the late 1950s, policy-makers generally agreed that the Soviet Union had reached a state of nuclear parity with the United States. Given the presumption that the United States would not start an all-out nuclear war, and that the Soviet Union would do so only at the risk of massive retaliation, some military planners believed that the Soviets would attempt to advance their objectives by provoking limited conflicts in which their own forces were not involved. The Air Force agreed with this notion in principle, but maintained that the single greatest danger to the United States remained a surprise nuclear attack. This belief, consistent with General LeMay's own, drove force structure decisions in the Air Force. While the other services clamored for more ground maneuver forces and transport capability to fight limited wars, General LeMay and other air leaders felt the Air Force could meet its requirements for any type of war with the existing manpower and weapons systems it maintained for large-scale conflict with the Soviet Union. In essence, General LeMay and the Air Force believed that the strategic force was the nation's backbone and could meet any threat across the spectrum of conflict.<sup>43</sup>

The Lebanon Crisis of 1958 put General LeMay's belief regarding the importance of the Air Force's strategic force to the test. In the months prior to this crisis, President Eisenhower had pledged American economic and military support to free nations combating the spread of

---

<sup>43</sup> Hildreth, *USAF Logistics Preparations for Limited War*, 2-3.

international communism.<sup>44</sup> In July 1958, an anti-Western insurrection forced Lebanese President Camille Chamoun to ask for such help, and during Operation Blue Bat, the Air Force supported the Lebanese by deploying a Composite Air Strike Force consisting of twelve different types of strike and support aircraft to the Middle East.<sup>45</sup> The other services also deployed forces to the area in support of the conflict, and the military intervention caused the anti-Western opposition to reconsider their objectives. Once American military forces arrived in Lebanon, tensions in the country abated, and ultimately, the crisis ended without major bloodshed.<sup>46</sup>

The Lebanon contingency reinforced General LeMay's beliefs regarding the importance of the nation's strength and his feeling regarding the propensity of communist forces to wilt in the face of American assertion. In a March 1959 speech in Miami, the general remarked that the "strong right arm of our national power for peace" was the true deciding factor in resolving the Lebanon Crisis.<sup>47</sup> To his way of thinking, SAC's 1,000 jet bombers armed with nuclear weapons at the ready "quietly poised in the background while the more spectacular developments took place on the immediate scene of the action" gave any Soviets who might try to exploit the unstable situation in the Middle East a reason to pause.<sup>48</sup> General LeMay carried this specific example with him and presented it to President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Other limited conflicts between the United States and Soviet proxies served to reinforce General LeMay's belief about the low

---

<sup>44</sup> Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: A History of Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907-1964* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Aerospace Studies Institute, 1971), 611.

<sup>45</sup> A. Timothy Warnock, *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations, 1947-1997*, Air Force History and Museums Program (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Warnock, *Short of War*, 11 and 19.

<sup>47</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, "Remarks before the Committee of One Hundred," (address, Miami, FL, 16 March 1959), Box B171, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>48</sup> LeMay, "Remarks before the Committee of One Hundred," 16 March 1959, Box B171, LeMay Papers.

possibility of escalation in a conflict between the two superpowers. In an April 1962 speech at the Naval War College, he stated “a good basic premise is that escalation is almost certain whenever vital interests risk defeat and whenever either side is capable of escalating.”<sup>49</sup> The twin consideration to this premise was that “escalation will not take place if the opponent senses that his vital interests will be exposed to the risk of defeat if he in fact does raise the level of violence.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, even if one country escalated a conflict, the other country would not continue the escalation if it would endanger its vital interests. In the case of the Soviet Union, General LeMay remarked that “they must always consider their relative power position with Red China if they escalate a limited war and, by escalating, raise their level of damage or loss to the point where they end up with less military power than the Chinese.”<sup>51</sup> Six months prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the general firmly believed escalation was an unlikely possibility.

In the years immediately preceding the Cuban Missile Crisis, General LeMay’s beliefs took their final shape. The discord between the services over the best way to fight limited wars reinforced his thought regarding the ability of the strategic force to meet any challenge across the spectrum of conflict. In Operation Blue Bat, General LeMay watched the Air Force respond to an unstable situation in Lebanon and help to

---

<sup>49</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, “Remarks to the Naval War College,” (address, Newport, RI, 10 April 1962), Box B175, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>50</sup> LeMay, “Remarks to the Naval War College,” 10 April 1962, Box B175, LeMay Papers.

<sup>51</sup> LeMay, “Remarks to the Naval War College,” 10 April 1962, Box B175, LeMay Papers. The author would like to point out the timing of General LeMay’s remarks. The general’s comments imply that he believed that the monolithic communist threat, which is the notion that all communist movements were unified and orchestrated from Moscow, was a myth long before it became common to do so. Part of this may be due to General LeMay’s experiences with the Chinese communists during World War II, when he commanded XX Bomber Command flying B-29 missions out of China against mainland Japan. Concerned for the safety of B-29 crews that went down in Chinese communist territory, General LeMay reached out to communist leader Mao Tse-Tung for assistance in recovering his airmen safely. Mao agreed to safely return General LeMay’s Airmen, and the two men eventually exchanged gifts and letters. General LeMay remarked that unlike the Soviets, who treated downed American pilots “more like prisoners than allies,” the Chinese communists were good to the Americans. Referring to Mao, General LeMay remarked “everything was smooth as silk in our relations.” See LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 334-337.

restore order. This crisis proved to General LeMay that the strength of the American tactical forces, backed by the nation's strategic deterrent, caused the communists to retreat from any potential effort to exploit the situation.

General LeMay also refined his views on escalation. He believed that the risk of escalation between the United States and the Soviet Union was quite small because the superpowers would not risk exposing their vital national interests by widening a smaller conflict. As the Cuban Missile Crisis loomed in the very near future, General LeMay's beliefs about the threats to the nation and the mission of the Air Force provide a final insight into his thoughts. At a March 1962 commander's conference, the general remarked "no one should forget that the primary threat to this country is still a surprise nuclear attack...our basic mission is to deter and to be ready to destroy the force that is capable of attacking and destroying us."<sup>52</sup> This view would prove quite relevant to General LeMay's advice during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

## **Conclusion**

General LeMay's personal experiences after World War II encouraged him to recommend swift and direct military intervention via air strikes, an invasion, and a full naval blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet entry onto the nuclear stage and the Korean War caused General LeMay to realize that limited war was likely the way of the future, yet underscored his beliefs about the importance of the early use of overwhelming force in any conflict. Standoffs in Berlin and Lebanon demonstrated that the Soviets would retreat in the face of strong American postures, at least in limited conflicts. General LeMay believed that any potential military intervention in Cuba would be nothing more than a limited war against a proxy of the Soviet Union.

---

<sup>52</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay to commanders at USAF Commander's Conference, 8 March 1962, "USAF's Basic Mission," Box B146, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



Perhaps most importantly, the general simply did not think the Cuban Missile Crisis would escalate into a broader conflict because vital Soviet national interests were not at stake in Cuba. These personal experiences shaped the general's military advice to President Kennedy. The next chapter will discuss the relevant organizational factors that may have influenced General LeMay's views and advice during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

## Chapter Two

### Organizational Influences on General LeMay

*If we go ahead with this air strike, on the missiles or on the missiles and the planes, and it seems that your recommendations would be both, when would that be ready?*

- President John F. Kennedy

*We can be ready for an attack at dawn on the twenty-first.*

- General Curtis E. LeMay

General LeMay's assertion that in less than forty-eight hours from President Kennedy's query, the Air Force would be ready to attack targets in Cuba speaks volumes about his confidence in his service and the military as a whole. One way to understand how General LeMay could make these claims with such certainty is to explore the organizations of which he was a part, and their influence on his advice to the president. Organizations directly influence policy formulation and decision-making because they create capabilities for achieving objectives which would not otherwise be possible for an individual alone. They also serve to constrain the range of possible outcomes from which one may choose from when making recommendations.<sup>1</sup> In light of this, this chapter seeks to understand the ways in which organizations such as Air Force combat commands, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the Headquarters Air Staff influenced General LeMay's advice to the president. General LeMay did not make his recommendations to the president in isolation of organizational considerations. Some organizations, such as Tactical Air Command (TAC) and the JCS, seem to have directly affected General LeMay's advice to the president on 19 October. The Air Staff, on the other hand, indirectly influenced the Chief of Staff by demonstrating the

---

<sup>1</sup> Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), 145.

capability to support the contingency in the event that the president implemented his recommendations during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

### **Leading up to the Crisis: Concerns in the Field**

Contrary to many popular accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the mid-October discovery of offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba did not catch everyone off guard. The military, and particularly the commands responsible for Cuba, had grown keenly aware of the threat a military buildup there would pose to the United States. In fact, the Air Force had been participating in a surveillance program over Cuba for months based on concerns stemming from enhanced Soviet and Cuban ties.<sup>2</sup> These Air Force operations were part of a larger Department of Defense (DoD) response to the arrival of several thousand Soviet military personnel and war materials in Cuba during the late spring and summer of 1962.<sup>3</sup> The growing tensions caused General Walter Sweeney, commander of Tactical Air Command (TAC), to initiate detailed planning in mid-summer of 1962 for offensive air operations against Cuba.<sup>4</sup> United States Atlantic Command, the unified command tasked with the Caribbean area of responsibility, also formulated three separate operational plans (OPLAN) to cope with potential crises in Cuba.<sup>5</sup> TAC held the responsibility of supporting these Atlantic Command OPLANs, and concerns by General Sweeney and the Airmen of TAC over the potential Cuban threat began to bubble up to General LeMay in the early Fall of 1962.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *The Air Force Role in Five Crises: 1958-1965* (Washington, DC: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 1968), 37, TS7192, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL (AFHRA). The overall classification of this report is Top Secret, although the excerpts used in this thesis were declassified on 3 February 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 12958.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph W. Angell, Jr., *The Air Force Response to the Cuban Crisis*, (Washington DC: USAF Historical Liaison Office, 1963), 5. Document is declassified. Obtained from the National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

<sup>4</sup> Lieutenant General Charles B. Westover, "A Highly Compressed Narrative Account and Assessment of the Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis," unpublished report in response to Air Force Historical Division Liaison Office tasking, 7 January 1963, 2-3, K417.042-21, AFHRA. Document is declassified.

<sup>5</sup> History, United States Atlantic Command, *CINCLANT Historical Account of Cuban Crisis*, 29 April 1963, 17. Document is declassified. Obtained from National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

Moreover, SAC was already deeply involved in operations over Cuba as General Sweeney and TAC began their planning efforts. SAC aircraft had been patrolling areas off the Cuban coast to intercept electronic signals emanating from the island since 15 June 1962. Although the United States had begun the surveillance of Cuba to guard against the possibility that the Soviets might try to deploy long-range offensive weapons to the island, SAC did not take over the main photographic effort from the Central Intelligence Agency until 14 October.<sup>6</sup> On the very first mission SAC flew, which consisted of a single U-2 aircraft flying one pass across the western end of Cuba, Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM) were discovered.<sup>7</sup> Air Force actions in the months prior to this fateful discovery would be central to General LeMay's military advice to the president on 19 October.

TAC planning prior to the discovery of offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba had revealed gaps in the DoD's plans for potential conflict. The most obvious gap was that JCS plans made no provisions for any kind of tactical air offensive against Cuba. TAC officers believed that tactical air was best suited to deal with a conflict in that country because it would provide the element of surprise necessary for a successful operation, and would be much less difficult to marshal than ground and naval forces.<sup>8</sup> In addition, even before SAC's discovery of the MRBMs on the 14 October mission, General Sweeney harbored suspicions over the types of Soviet weapons arriving in Cuba. Informed by his intelligence staff, the TAC commander told aides that the Cubans might be receiving mobile MRBMs with a nuclear capability in many of the huge crates that were arriving from the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> The general believed TAC aircraft were

---

<sup>6</sup> Nalty, *The Air Force Role in Five Crises*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," Report no. SM-1451-62, 21 December 1962, 5. Document is declassified. Obtained from National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

<sup>8</sup> Westover, "Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis," 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> General Wilbur L. Creech, interview by Hugh N. Ahmann, 1 June 1992, transcript, 63, K239.0512-2050, AFHRA. Major, later General, Wilbur Creech was General Sweeney's aide-de-

best suited to attack this mobile threat.<sup>10</sup> The perceived Air Force planning deficiencies that arose in the late summer of 1962, coupled with concerns over the types of weapons shipped in by the Soviets, caused General Sweeney to order development of air operations plans (OPLAN) for a contingency in Cuba.

Throughout September 1962, TAC built a detailed plan for offensive air operations against Cuba and on 27 September, General Sweeney briefed it to General LeMay. TAC designed the air offensive, dubbed Operation Rock Pile, to attack 212 targets, including Cuban airfields, defensive installations, Soviet bombers, and any offensive ballistic missiles on the island.<sup>11</sup> In justifying the plan, General Sweeney told General LeMay that “the outlook is for the Soviets to continue with the arms build-up in Cuba with the objective of setting the price of US intervention at an unacceptably high level and of denying the US surveillance of the Soviet offensive build-up.”<sup>12</sup> Further, the TAC commander advised the Chief of Staff “that the offensive weapons [in Cuba] will include ballistic missiles, jet bombers, missile and submarine bases and airfields for the recovery of long-range bombers.”<sup>13</sup> During this late-September briefing, General Sweeney apparently convinced General LeMay of the severity of the problem in Cuba. General LeMay approved the TAC plan on the spot and directed that by 20 October, all implementation preparations be complete. He also directed that General Sweeney offer the plan and his services to Admiral Robert Dennison, Commander in Chief of Atlantic Command (CINCLANT) with the full support of the Air Force. Admiral Dennison immediately accepted the TAC plan and designated it CINCLANT OPLAN 312, Air Offensive Cuba,

---

camp at TAC prior to and during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He recounted this story based on conversations with General Sweeney and his own personal observations.

<sup>10</sup> Westover, “Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis,” 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Nalty, *The Air Force Role in Five Crises*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Westover, “Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis,” 3.

<sup>13</sup> Westover, “Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis,” 3.

and designated General Sweeney as the commander of Atlantic Command's air component.<sup>14</sup>

The information TAC presented over the potential threat posed by the buildup of arms in Cuba disturbed General LeMay. As he departed for an official trip to Europe, the general warned his personal staff that trouble might be brewing in Cuba, and he ordered that the Air Force implement measures to prepare for such a possibility.<sup>15</sup> With the exception of one day, 10 October, the general planned to be in Europe from 2-20 October and thus would not have a chance to supervise these preparatory actions.<sup>16</sup> Although he did not realize it at the time he departed for Europe, General LeMay's recommendation to the president hinged on General Sweeney's ability to ready the forces under his command.

As General LeMay visited European air bases, and prior to the fateful SAC U-2 flight, General Sweeney and his planners refined OPLAN 312 in consultation with Atlantic Command. Admiral Dennison delegated operational control of all air forces as well as responsibility for overall target allocation and priorities of attack to General Sweeney.<sup>17</sup> Given these responsibilities, General Sweeney determined the objectives and sequencing of the air strikes in support of OPLAN 312. The overall objective was to "achieve the complete destruction of the Cuban air order of battle to include aircraft, air bases, SAM sites, selected AA gun positions, and other selected targets."<sup>18</sup> The force to execute OPLAN 312 included 404 strike aircraft, 36 air-to-air fighters, 45 reconnaissance planes, 30 tankers, and 130 transports.<sup>19</sup> Execution would occur within

---

<sup>14</sup> Westover, "Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis," 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas M. Coffey, *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 388.

<sup>16</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>17</sup> Westover, "Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis," 4.

<sup>18</sup> Tactical Air Command, "AFLANT OPLAN 312 Planning Factors: Operations, Communications, Logistics, Personnel," 1962, K417.042-21, AFHRA. Document is declassified.

<sup>19</sup> Tactical Air Command, "AFLANT OPLAN 312 Planning Factors."

the daylight hours of a single day, with tactical forces launching from their home bases as far away as California and recovering at forward staging bases in the Southeastern United States. In support of OPLAN 312, the Air Force pre-staged war reserve material (WRM) and personnel at Florida bases.<sup>20</sup> All TAC forces cycled through target ranges in Florida to become more familiar with the operation and test various munitions against simulated Cuban targets.<sup>21</sup> By the time SAC exposed ballistic missiles in Cuba, a large portion of the TAC forces committed to OPLAN 312 were already fully engaged in training exercises in Florida and the build-up of WRM at the bases there was well underway.

As the Cuban Missile Crisis erupted in the aftermath of SAC's 14 October reconnaissance flight, TAC forces stood at the ready, and this reality likely had a significant effect on General LeMay's advice to the president. When the gravity of the situation became increasingly clear, General Taylor recalled General LeMay from Europe on 17 October.<sup>22</sup> Less than forty-eight hours after he arrived back in the United States, General LeMay would find himself in the Cabinet Room of the White House meeting with the president. The day before that White House meeting, General LeMay met with General Sweeney for two hours over lunch in his quarters at Fort Myer.<sup>23</sup> Although there is no record of that meeting's agenda, the two generals likely talked about the situation in Cuba and TAC's level of preparedness to execute contingency operations there. TAC was indeed ready, thanks to the preparatory actions taken in the time leading up to the famous U-2 flight. By midnight on 19 October, all support requirements to execute OPLAN 312 were in place, including 47,456 bombs and rockets and 2.7 million rounds of 20mm

---

<sup>20</sup> Westover, "Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis," 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information, "Cuban Crisis Chronology," 1962, 7, K168.052-1, AFHRA. The overall classification of this report is Secret, although the excerpts used in this thesis were declassified on 12 January 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 12958.

<sup>22</sup> General William F. McKee, interview by James C. Hasdorff, 13-14 March 1979, transcript, 120-121, K329.0512-1118, AFHRA.

<sup>23</sup> LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, LeMay Papers.

ammunition.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, 623 aircraft, including strike fighters, reconnaissance planes, and tankers began to converge on the southeastern United States.<sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly General Sweeney relayed this information to General LeMay, for without this information the Chief of Staff could not have made the claim that the Air Force could be ready to attack Cuba on 21 October.

### **Missiles Exposed: General LeMay and the Joint Chiefs of Staff**

The JCS sprung into action once SAC reconnaissance photos revealed the existence of offensive ballistic missiles in Cuba, and General LeMay found himself occupied with JCS obligations throughout the crisis. As a service chief, General LeMay spent a great deal of his time dealing with JCS matters. The chief of staff recalled that during a normal work week, he spent “seventy to seventy-five percent of his time on JCS activities,” because the organization met a minimum of three days a week for the majority of the day.<sup>26</sup> The general’s familiarity with the JCS, however, caused him to voice concerns regarding the effectiveness of the organization in fulfilling its responsibilities. In August 1962, the general submitted a memorandum in which he advocated procedural and organizational changes to “increase the responsiveness of the Joint Chiefs of Staff organization to the defense environment.”<sup>27</sup> The Cuban Missile Crisis began just weeks later, and the organization was put to the test without any of General LeMay’s proposals in force.

Although General LeMay had been Air Force Chief of Staff for over a year when the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out, he was not very familiar in an official capacity with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

---

<sup>24</sup> Angell, Jr., *The Air Force Response to the Cuban Crisis*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Nalty, *The Air Force Role in Five Crises*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 507 and 513.

<sup>27</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay to Honorable James H. Douglas, Chairman of Committee to Consider Structure of Joint Chiefs of Staff, letter, 22 August 1962, Box B148, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



General Taylor. The chairman assumed his position on 1 October 1962, and by the time he recalled General LeMay from Europe on 17 October, the two men had spent only two days working together in their formal capacities on the JCS.<sup>28</sup> When General LeMay arrived in Washington on 17 October, the JCS was already deeply involved in crisis deliberations. The lack of official familiarity between General LeMay and General Taylor may have played a role in what the chairman called “obvious skepticism as to the quality of my efforts” in relaying the JCS views to the president during the crisis.<sup>29</sup>

General LeMay was much more familiar with the other members of the JCS than he was with the chairman. General David Shoup, Commandant of the Marine Corps, had served in that capacity since January 1960 and held the longest tenure of any of the chiefs. Like General LeMay, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral George Anderson, had been in office since the summer of 1961. Although General Earle Wheeler, Chief of Staff of the Army, also assumed his position on 1 October 1962, General LeMay had worked with him quite a bit. Prior to becoming Army Chief of Staff, General Wheeler served as the Director of the Joint Staff and attended most of the JCS meetings that the service chiefs attended. Unlike the Chairman, these four service chiefs had served together in an official capacity for a length of time and knew each other well. Looking back on the crisis, Admiral Anderson felt that the chiefs “worked superbly together,” to help resolve the crisis.<sup>30</sup>

By 18 October, the day General LeMay attended his first JCS meeting devoted to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the three other service chiefs and their chairman had deliberated for over forty-eight hours. On 15 October, the day prior to the discovery of the ballistic missiles in Cuba, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told the JCS that the

---

<sup>28</sup> LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, LeMay Papers.

<sup>29</sup> Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: WW Norton, 1972), 269.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Graham Barlow, *President John F. Kennedy and His Joint Chiefs of Staff* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1981), 113.

“president wants no military action within the next three months” and although no one could control world events, “the probabilities are strongly against military action in the next 30 days.”<sup>31</sup> Discovery of the ballistic missiles, however, upended this intention. On 16 October, the JCS, with vice chief of staff General William F. “Bozo” McKee representing the Air Force in General LeMay’s absence, unanimously agreed the threat was so serious as to warrant a military response.<sup>32</sup> As the 16 October meeting went on, members of the JCS formulated different opinions as to the best course of action. General Wheeler and Admiral Anderson favored an air attack without warning, followed by an invasion. General McKee and General Taylor preferred an air attack against military targets in Cuba as a first step; both men felt that a ground invasion would not be necessary. General Shoup favored an ultimatum to remove the ballistic missiles followed by military action if the Soviets did not respond.<sup>33</sup>

By the end of the day on 17 October, the JCS presented their proposed courses of action in a memorandum to Secretary McNamara. They advocated an air attack against all offensive missile sites, combat aircraft, and nuclear storage facilities as well as attacks on ships, tanks, and other appropriate military targets. The JCS also felt that a complete naval blockade of Cuba was necessary. There was not unanimous agreement regarding an invasion in response to the missiles in Cuba, although the JCS did advise Secretary McNamara that any attempt to eliminate the Castro regime would require an invasion.<sup>34</sup> Following the JCS meetings that day, General McKee and Lieutenant General David Burchinal, the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, met with General LeMay, who had just arrived at the Pentagon, to back-

---

<sup>31</sup> US Department of Defense, “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, October-November 1962: Dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis,” 2. Obtained from National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

<sup>32</sup> JCS Historical Division, “Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis,” 12.

<sup>33</sup> DoD, “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> JCS Historical Division, “Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis,” 15.

brief the Chief of Staff on the JCS deliberations that had occurred since the crisis broke out.<sup>35</sup>

The JCS meetings of 18 October and early on 19 October were the only ones General LeMay attended prior to the meeting with the president. Information in these meetings had the potential to make the greatest immediate impact on him. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) briefings to the JCS on those days indicated that reconnaissance photos now showed permanent missile launch sites in Cuba. DIA also advised that sixteen 1100 nautical mile MRBMs could be operationally ready in 18 hours, while longer-range intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) would not be ready until December 1962.<sup>36</sup> Based on the updated intelligence on the MRBMs and IRBMs, the JCS finalized their recommendations for the president. General Taylor maintained the opinion that the United States should only prepare for an invasion at that time.<sup>37</sup> The service chiefs did not agree with the chairman. Going into the meeting with the president, General LeMay, along with the three other service chiefs, strongly favored comprehensive air strikes, a complete naval blockade, and an invasion of the island.<sup>38</sup>

The fact that General LeMay was unable to attend the first two days of JCS deliberations affected the influence of that organization on General LeMay's advice to the president. Before General LeMay arrived at the Pentagon, the three other chiefs had already briefed their recommendations to the Secretary of Defense. Although there is no concrete evidence indicating General LeMay developed his advice to the president based on discussions within the JCS, it is clear that he ultimately went against General McKee's position of 17 October which favored air strikes alone. This decision might have been based on

---

<sup>35</sup> LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, LeMay Papers.

<sup>36</sup> JCS Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," 19

<sup>37</sup> DoD, "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 9-10; JCS Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," 20.

<sup>38</sup> JCS Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," 20.

updated intelligence of MRBM and IRBM activity, but may have also been as a result of General LeMay's long-standing working relationships with the other service chiefs. Regardless of the particular catalyst, however, it is clear General LeMay's interactions with the JCS organization encouraged him to think more broadly about the range of military options available to solve the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the end, one must also note the striking rift in opinions between the four service chiefs and their newly-appointed chairman. The advice that General LeMay and the other chiefs wanted to give the president was not consistent with the recommendations their chairman was prepared to make. This lack of unity may not have been helpful in convincing the president of the value of their recommendations.

### **Mobilization for War: General LeMay and the Air Staff**

General LeMay had high expectations for the Air Staff, and the Cuban Missile Crisis required staff officers to go to great lengths in support of their chief. In an address to the Air Staff orientation course just weeks prior to the outbreak of the crisis, General LeMay told officers "you will probably have to work longer hours, and harder, than you ever have...but on the other hand, I think that most of you will, probably, make the greatest contribution to the Air Force that you have made or will make during your career, while you are here on duty in the Air Staff."<sup>39</sup>

Given these remarks, one might surmise the Air Staff as an organization would have a major part in formulating General LeMay's advice to the president, but this is not the case. Operational security limited General LeMay's ability to request support from the Air Staff because very few people in the Air Force, with the exception of General LeMay's most senior advisors, knew the full extent of the situation in

---

<sup>39</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, "Remarks to Air Staff Orientation," (address, Washington, DC, 18 September 1962), Box B174, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Cuba.<sup>40</sup> Operational security aside, it is unlikely that General LeMay would have requested much from his staff in the way of course of action formulation or analysis. He worried about the effectiveness of the Air Staff, and in a note to Secretary of the Air Force Eugene Zuckert, General LeMay remarked “I have been particularly concerned, as you have, about the basic philosophy of the headquarters operation.”<sup>41</sup> An inspection of General LeMay’s interactions with the Air Staff leading up to the 19 October meeting reveals that the organization did indeed have an impact on their chief of staff’s recommendation to the president, although not in the same manner as Air Force combat commands or the JCS.

General LeMay’s views about staff functions affected the Air Staff’s impact during the crisis. General LeMay simply did not view his staff as an advisory body or organization for analysis. Rather, he viewed the staff as a support function for Air Force field commands. The general believed “your staff becomes very important to get the pick and shovel work done.” Most staff officers, however, did not see themselves in that light. “The general feeling of most staffs is that the combat people are working for them,” remarked the general, “they think up things for them to do, and are always asking for reports and more information, and telling them to do this or do that.” General LeMay certainly did not agree with this mindset, and he stated “this is not the way I wanted to operate.” Rather, “I wanted to operate in the reverse, that the staff existed for the benefit of the combat outfits and it flowed the other way...the combat outfits asked the staff for help, and while they didn’t order them around to do things, in effect this is what happened.”<sup>42</sup> When combat units needed help, the “staff had to provide it,” he stated, “the staff existed to facilitate the

---

<sup>40</sup> Barlow, *President John F. Kennedy and His Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 206.

<sup>41</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force chief of staff, to Honorable Eugene Zuckert, secretary of the Air Force, memorandum, 5 September 1961, Box B153, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>42</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by John T. Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 35-36, K239.0512-736, AFHRA.

combat units in the performance of their mission.”<sup>43</sup> This notion provides insight into the Air Staff’s role in the period leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Because General LeMay devoted much of his time to JCS issues, senior Air Staff officers guided the weight of Air Force planning in the months leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although the Air Staff as a whole was not aware of the presence of ballistic missiles in Cuba due to operational security, many components of the organization were ready to support the crisis well in advance of its outbreak.<sup>44</sup> As early as June 1962, the Air Staff Directorate of Plans and Programs (DCS/P&P) was deeply involved in review of Atlantic Command OPLANs for Cuba and provided analysis for TAC on basing and equipment support requirements.<sup>45</sup> In August 1962, DCS/P&P built a plan to preposition seven days of WRM and by early October, the organization had provided field commands the authority and guidance for allocation of war consumables in support of a Cuban contingency.<sup>46</sup> These preparatory actions “provided a firm basis for expedited completion of actions on 18-20 October” by units in the field.<sup>47</sup> Like DCS/P&P, the Directorate of Operations was ready for a conflict in Cuba. During September and October, the Command Plans Section built a comprehensive analysis of Atlantic Command plans and those of any Air Force field command that might be involved in Cuba.<sup>48</sup> Because the Air Staff had been involved in many of the activities leading up to the crisis, the organization was well postured when the crisis broke out.

---

<sup>43</sup> LeMay, interview by Bohn, 9 March 1971, transcript, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Barlow, *President John F. Kennedy and His Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 206.

<sup>45</sup> Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, “Cuban Chronology Submissions,” 1962, C1-C2, K168.052-1, AFHRA. The overall classification of this report is Secret, although the portions used in this thesis were declassified on 18 January 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 12958.

<sup>46</sup> Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, “Cuban Chronology Submissions,” C3.

<sup>47</sup> Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, “Cuban Chronology Submissions,” C5.

<sup>48</sup> Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, “Cuban Chronology Submissions,” 1962, C5, TS7192, AFHRA. The overall classification of this report is Top Secret, although the portions used in this thesis were declassified on 3 February 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 12958.

With the discovery of the ballistic missiles on 16 October, those senior Air Staff officers cleared to know the full details of the situation took critical actions to prepare their staffs for the contingency. On 16 October, Major General Robert Breitweiser, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, organized an intelligence “war council” on the Air Staff which met daily to “evaluate the threat and plan definitive intelligence actions to support the national objectives.”<sup>49</sup> That same day, General McKee directed the stand-up of an Air Force Logistics Readiness Center in the Pentagon to maintain the current status of all war consumable supplies and logistic areas in support of Atlantic Command OPLANs. On 17 October, the Air Staff Deputy Director of Operations formed an alert staff to follow the development and modification of the military efforts pertaining to Cuba.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to operations and logistics support, the Air Staff reviewed personnel requirements for a contingency. The Air Staff Directorate of Personnel worked closely with Secretary Zuckert’s office to review requirements for a potential call up of reserve forces and provided this information to Secretary McNamara.<sup>51</sup> By the time General LeMay arrived at the Pentagon in the afternoon of 17 October, the staff believed that the logistics requirements to support a conflict in Cuba would be complete by 20 October.<sup>52</sup> This information would prove central to General LeMay’s comment to the president that the Air Force would be ready to strike by 21 October.

The Air Staff’s level of readiness and its actions played a significant role in General LeMay’s ability to advocate for air strikes as early as 21 October. Consistent with General LeMay’s own preferences, however, most Air Staff actions leading up to the discovery of the ballistic missiles in Cuba supported Air Force combat command requirements. General

---

<sup>49</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information, “Cuban Crisis Chronology,” 2-3.

<sup>50</sup> Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, “Cuban Chronology Submissions,” C5.

<sup>51</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information, “Cuban Crisis Chronology,” 4.

<sup>52</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information, “Cuban Crisis Chronology,” 2.

LeMay did consult with Secretary Zuckert and Generals McKee and Burchinal regularly in the time leading up to the meeting with the president, but these meetings likely did not shape the chief of staff's pending recommendation to the commander in chief.<sup>53</sup> In essence, General LeMay used his staff as a resource management agency during the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps the most important Air Staff contribution to General LeMay's recommendation occurred when he returned from Europe on 17 October. When he arrived at the Pentagon, the chief of staff found the Air Staff mobilized for war and postured to support any recommendation he might decide to provide to the president. This fact may have bolstered General LeMay's confidence. The support that the Air Staff stood ready to provide enabled him to make specific recommendations to the president without concern for organizational shortfalls.

## **Conclusion**

The organizations around General LeMay influenced the formulation of his recommendations to the president in different ways. The Chief of Staff's executive officer during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Brigadier General Richard Ellis, recalled that General LeMay "had the instincts, ability, background, knowledge...that generally had the Air Force in the right direction on big decisions...he didn't have to seek a lot of advice, although he was very careful to insure that the field commanders were consulted."<sup>55</sup> That was true enough. General Sweeney and TAC's concerns over the situation in Cuba beginning in the summer of 1962 set the stage for General LeMay to direct Air Force actions in support of potential contingencies there. The subsequent readiness of TAC forces at the time of General LeMay's meeting with the president gave substance to his promise of a 48-hour timetable for

---

<sup>53</sup> LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, LeMay Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Nalty, *The Air Force Role in Five Crises*, 48.

<sup>55</sup> General Richard H. Ellis, interview by Edgar F. Puryear, 19 June 1979, transcript, 4, K239.0512-1412, AFHRA.



comprehensive air strikes. The consistency of General LeMay's advice with those of his fellow service chiefs is telling. The JCS appears to have encouraged General LeMay to think more broadly about the range of military options available to solve the crisis. The Air Staff had less of a direct impact on the formulation of General LeMay's advice. Rather, the Air Staff's readiness to support any range of operations in Cuba gave him confidence in the Air Force's ability to carry out his recommendations. The next chapter will discuss the impact of General LeMay's advice and his role following the 19 October meeting with the president.

## Chapter Three

### **As the Crisis Unfolds: General LeMay's Impact**

*The people who are best off are the people whose advice is not taken  
because whatever we do is filled with hazards.*

- President John F. Kennedy

President Kennedy remained undecided on a course of action following the 19 October meeting with the JCS. Although he eventually chose a different course than General LeMay recommended, the commander in chief did not discard the notion of air strikes or an invasion of Cuba. The president realized that regardless of the first steps taken to resolve the crisis, subsequent events might make air attacks or an invasion necessary at a later date.<sup>1</sup> This chapter focuses on the specific decisions made and actions pursued following the 19 October meeting between President Kennedy and the JCS. A close inspection of General LeMay's role in the president's decisions reveals how differently the two men viewed the crisis. General LeMay believed that the crisis was an opportunity to resolve the issue of communist presence in Cuba, while President Kennedy felt, more modestly, that the best he could do was continue to manage a tense geo-political environment at the height of the Cold War.

### **Changing Expectations: President Kennedy, NSAM-55, and his NSC**

As he assumed the duties of chief of staff of the Air Force, General LeMay became the senior air advisor in a presidential administration that differed significantly from its predecessor. As SAC commander and later as vice-chief of staff, General LeMay had served under President Eisenhower, a man who had also served in the nation's highest military positions and was familiar with military styles of decision-making.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. McNamara, secretary of defense, memorandum for record, 21 October 1962, "Notes on October 21, 1962, Meeting with the President." Obtained from the National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

President Kennedy, on the other hand, was a Lieutenant, Junior Grade in the Navy while General LeMay was a Major General in the air arm during World War II. Although the new president owned noteworthy combat accomplishments, this may have shaped General LeMay's basic impressions of the young commander in chief. Beyond the president, many senior members of the Kennedy administration possessed limited military credentials. Secretary McNamara had in fact worked for General LeMay as a mid-level analyst in the Pacific Theater during World War II.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that President Kennedy maintained an inner circle of advisors who lacked significant military credentials seemed to affect General LeMay. He felt strongly that senior military officers were best suited to provide military advice to the president.<sup>3</sup> But that was not precisely how the president operated. National Security Action Memorandum 55 (NSAM-55), which the president signed in June 1961, laid out specific guidance for senior American military officers. The president certainly expected the JCS to be "his principal military advisor[s] responsible for both initiating advice to him and for responding to requests for advice," but he also wanted the service chiefs to offer "*dynamic and imaginative leadership in contributing to the success of the military and paramilitary aspects of Cold War programs.*"<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most strikingly, the president wanted the JCS to consider and comment on factors outside their traditional realm of expertise, to be "more than military men" and to help the administration fit "military requirements into the overall context of any situation, recognizing that the most difficult problem in government is to combine all assets in a unified, effective pattern."<sup>5</sup> In other words, President Kennedy wanted his JCS to

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. McNamara, interview by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., April 4, 1964, transcript, 8, JFKL.

<sup>3</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Robert F. Futrell, Thomas G. Belden, and J. Van Staaveren, 8 June 1972, transcript, 36-38, K239.0512-592, AFHRA.

<sup>4</sup> President John F. Kennedy to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 28 June 1961, "National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 55: Relations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations," National Security Files, Box 330, JFKL. Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy to JCS, "NSAM-55", 28 Jun 1961, National Security Files, Box 330, JFKL. Emphasis added.

provide advice that considered the political and policy implications of a given situation.

At the same time, the president's decision-making style invited many actors to comment on military affairs. He preferred to rely on informal meetings and direct contact with his personal staff when making decisions, and he "paid little attention to organization charts and chains of command which diluted and distributed his authority...[and] which stifled alternatives to find the lowest common denominator of compromise."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the words of McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy used all governmental arms "for information and comment," but then relied upon a select few for "final advice and decision."<sup>7</sup>

All this meant that General LeMay and the other service chiefs could not rely on the formal organizational structures that had privileged their advice to past presidents in matters of military affairs. In the Kennedy administration, military men would have to compete in a more open, complex, and personal forum for the president's ear.

### **Decisions as the Crisis Unfolded**

President Kennedy did not completely dismiss General LeMay's advice after their meeting on 19 October, yet he was clearly frustrated. After his meeting, he told Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen, "this thing is falling apart" and that he needed their help in pulling the group together to form a consensus on the first step to take in response to the Soviet actions in Cuba.<sup>8</sup> This would not be easy, because the solution was not straightforward. "Our situation was made more difficult by the fact that there was no obvious or simple solution," Robert Kennedy

---

<sup>6</sup> Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 281-285.

<sup>7</sup> McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, to Theodore Sorensen, Special Assistant to the President, memorandum, 8 March 1963, "Decision-Making in the White House," National Security Files, Box 327, JFKL.

<sup>8</sup> Sheldon M. Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis*, Stanford Nuclear Age Series (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 71.

remarked, “dogmatism was simply not possible [and] for every position there was inherent weaknesses.”<sup>9</sup>

As the EXCOM deliberations continued over the next few days, the president began to grow more concerned with the negative perceptions surprise military action in Cuba might generate. From the outset, some members of the EXCOM had believed that a surprise attack on Cuba would be analogous to an American ‘Pearl Harbor’. George Ball, the Under Secretary of State, reminded the president that “we tried the Japanese as war criminals because of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor,” and a surprise attack “would alienate a great part of the civilized world by behaving in a manner wholly contrary to our traditions.”<sup>10</sup> These comments clearly influenced the president. On 20 Oct, President Kennedy told his brother Robert that a surprise attack like Pearl Harbor was “not in our traditions.”<sup>11</sup> Partly as a result of these concerns, the first step in response to the Soviet action became a naval quarantine of offensive military equipment that the Soviets were shipping to the island.<sup>12</sup>

Information that reinforced President Kennedy’s decision for a naval quarantine arrived during a meeting with an Air Force officer other than General LeMay. Although the president made the decision on 20 October to authorize the blockade as a first step, he directed that the JCS be prepared to execute air strikes against the ballistic missile

---

<sup>9</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: WW Norton, 1969), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest R. May and Philip Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 75-76. Several members of the EXCOM felt the Pearl Harbor analogy was particularly inappropriate. Secretary of State Dean Acheson told the president, “at Pearl Harbor the Japanese without provocation or warning attacked our fleet thousands of miles from their shores. In the present situation, the Soviet Union had installed missiles ninety miles from our coast—while denying they were doing so—offensive weapons that were capable of lethal injury to the United States. This they were doing a hundred and forty years after the warning given in [the Monroe Doctrine]. How much warning was necessary to avoid the stigma of ‘Pearl Harbor’ in reverse?” President Kennedy, however, did not accept this argument. See Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 7.

<sup>11</sup> May and Zelikow, *Kennedy Tapes*, 189.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 167.

locations on 22 or 23 October.<sup>13</sup> As part of these preparations, the president asked General Sweeney, TAC Commander, to come to the White House on 21 October with Robert Kennedy, Secretary McNamara, and General Taylor, to brief him on the tactical details of the air attack plan.<sup>14</sup> It is unclear why General LeMay did not attend the meeting, but if invited, the chief of staff undoubtedly would have been present.<sup>15</sup> The president had already solicited General LeMay's opinions and perhaps did not feel that the chief of staff's presence was necessary for a discussion on the tactical aspects of the proposed air strikes.

With General LeMay back at the Pentagon, General Sweeney briefed the president on the air attack plan, which consisted of strikes on the ballistic missiles sites, SAM sites, and airfields.<sup>16</sup> President Kennedy asked General Sweeney if the air strikes could destroy all the known missiles.<sup>17</sup> General Sweeney believed the attack would be successful, but noted even under optimum conditions it was unlikely air strikes would destroy all of the known missiles. General Taylor added that "the best we can offer you is to destroy 90% of the known missiles."<sup>18</sup> Given the prevailing belief that the United States had only located 60% of the total missiles in Cuba, this meant the initial airstrikes would likely require follow-on sorties. These subsequent attacks, Secretary McNamara and Generals Taylor and Sweeney believed, would inevitably lead to an invasion of Cuba.<sup>19</sup> President Kennedy concurred with their

---

<sup>13</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," Report no. SM-1451-62, 21 December 1962, 25. Obtained from the National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

<sup>14</sup> McNamara, "Notes on October 21, 1962, Meeting with the President."

<sup>15</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. General LeMay's schedule that day consisted of JCS meetings at the Pentagon from 0900-1915.

<sup>16</sup> McNamara, "Notes on October 21, 1962, Meeting with the President."

<sup>17</sup> General Wilbur L. Creech, interview by Hugh N. Ahmann, 1 June 1992, transcript, 63, K239.0512-2050, AFHRA. As his aide-de-camp, Gen Creech accompanied Gen Sweeney to the White House and attended the meeting with the president along with Robert Kennedy, Secretary McNamara, and General Taylor.

<sup>18</sup> McNamara, "Notes on October 21, 1962, Meeting with the President."

<sup>19</sup> McNamara, "Notes on October 21, 1962, Meeting with the President."

assessment.<sup>20</sup> The president was simply not willing to acquiesce to an invasion at that time, and General Sweeney's advice cemented the naval quarantine as an opening gambit. According to Robert Kennedy, the meeting with General Sweeney "ended the small, lingering doubt that might still have remained" over which course of action to take as a first step.<sup>21</sup>

As the naval quarantine began, the president and EXCOM continued to assess the situation in case stronger military action was necessary. On 25 October, the EXCOM grew concerned that the Soviets would challenge the naval quarantine. Just as General LeMay had advised six days before, Robert Kennedy began to think that it might be better to knock out the Soviet missiles rather than risk a confrontation at sea.<sup>22</sup> Based on these concerns, the president again considered air strikes as an option, and the EXCOM debated the positive and negative points of such an action.<sup>23</sup>

In a memorandum for the president's review on 25 October, the EXCOM position looked noticeably similar to that of the military chiefs' on 19 October. The EXCOM believed that an air strike would carry out the president's pledge to eliminate the offensive threat in Cuba, while showing that the United States had the will to fight and protect its vital interests. Nearly taking words out of General LeMay's mouth, the EXCOM noted air strikes "may carry smaller risks of further escalation than a series of [naval] confrontations over a period of time," and they would be unlikely to generate a strong Soviet response because they were "unlikely to be decisively affected by this action in an area non-vital to the Soviets."<sup>24</sup> Air strikes could also "demonstrate to Cubans, Castro,

---

<sup>20</sup> May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, 154.

<sup>21</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, 426.

<sup>23</sup> Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 121.

<sup>24</sup> C. Douglas Dillon, secretary of the treasury, memorandum, 25 October 1962, "Scenario for Air Strike against Offensive Missile Bases and Bombers in Cuba." Obtained from the National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

and others, the weakness of the Soviet position,” and “it is unlikely that the risks of major war are greater [with air strikes] than through escalation of blockade.”<sup>25</sup> Of course, General LeMay and the other members of the JCS had made a similar argument during their 19 October meeting with the president. It is unlikely General LeMay had burned a bridge with the president during their meeting. Rather, the benefit of time, coupled with the precision of the chief of staff’s recommendation and the reality of actually having to enforce the quarantine, caused the president to develop more fully his own position.

The president never had to make the decision to implement General LeMay’s recommendations. By 28 October, the Soviets had agreed to withdraw their offensive ballistic missiles from Cuba. In the end, President Kennedy did not discard General LeMay’s recommendations during the Cuban Missile Crisis; he simply did not have to follow them. Throughout the crisis the president stayed prepared for the worst case scenario. Secretary McNamara recalled the president “recognized that, by initiating a blockade, we might subsequently be forced to other action, and of course he instructed us, as I feel he should have, to make preparations for additional actions.”<sup>26</sup>

From the outset of the crisis, the president desired to keep the situation under control, and searched for a course of action that centered on managing the situation. Theodore Sorensen wrote that “President Kennedy, foreseeing a nuclear confrontation with the Soviets over Cuba...made certain that his first move did not close out either all his options or all of theirs,” for he realized “once he closes a door behind him, it may never open again.”<sup>27</sup> Put simply, the president wanted to get the ballistic missiles out of Cuba, while avoiding a conflict with the Soviets that might jeopardize Berlin or other American interests around

---

<sup>25</sup> Dillon “Scenario for Air Strike against Offensive Missile Bases and Bombers in Cuba.”

<sup>26</sup> McNamara, interview by Schlesinger, April 4, 1964, transcript, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Theodore Sorensen, “The Olive Branch or the Arrows,” (address, New York, 18 April 1963), National Security Files, Box 327A, JFKL.



the world. To accomplish this, he chose incremental military actions, rather than large-scale military operations, to avoid the perception of an American Pearl Harbor or which would otherwise risk an escalation of the conflict.

### **General Lemay's Actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis**

General LeMay's actions as the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolded show that he saw the crisis as an opportunity to use in a decisive way military force to rid Cuba of communist influence. Following the meeting with the president, General LeMay and the rest of the JCS returned to the Pentagon to continue their efforts because it was clear the commander in chief had not yet reached a conclusion on the way to handle the crisis. Over the next ten days, General LeMay spent most of his time in JCS meetings, but broke away at times to discuss Air Force preparations with his senior Air Force advisors, notably Generals Burchinal and McKee.<sup>28</sup> General Burchinal remarked that he and General LeMay "slept in the Pentagon right around the clock" during the crisis, but that was an exaggeration because the chief of staff's records show that with the exception of 22 October, he arrived no earlier than 0800 and departed around 1800.<sup>29</sup> The chief of staff "may have been smoking a longer cigar because we had to do a job, but he didn't stay in the Pentagon worrying about it," recalled General LeMay's assistant executive officer. He "knew he had people out in the field to do the job."<sup>30</sup> America's senior Airman simply did not believe the Cuban Missile Crisis could be resolved with negotiation from Washington.

It took the president just over twenty four hours after his meeting with the JCS to reach the quarantine decision, and during that time,

---

<sup>28</sup> LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, LeMay Papers.

<sup>29</sup> Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton*, USAF Warrior Studies, Office of US Air Force History (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1988), 116-117; LeMay, October 1962 Appointment Book, Box B177, LeMay Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Brigadier General William H. Fairbrother, interview by Martin J. Miller, Jr. and Joseph A. Ventolo, Jr., 7 June 1974, transcript, 25, K239.0512-742, AFHRA.

General LeMay and the service chiefs worked diligently to draw up air and ground attack options in the event that the president would choose to implement them. Early in the morning of 20 October, the JCS received word of a nuclear weapons storage bunker in Cuba, which indicated the Soviets intended to establish a strategic base in Cuba rather than use the missile deployment for some transient purpose. Based on this evidence, the JCS wrote a memorandum for the president calling for air strikes on all offensive weapons and their supporting defenses beginning on 23 October. This suggestion did not influence the president as much as the JCS might have liked, for late that evening General Taylor returned from the White House to inform the service chiefs of the decision to establish a naval quarantine of Cuba.<sup>31</sup> The JCS chairman told the service chiefs “this was not one of our better days,” and relayed the president’s comment that “I know that you and your colleagues are unhappy with the decision, but I trust you will support me.”<sup>32</sup> Like any good Airman, General LeMay did just that.

General LeMay and the JCS worked hard to support the president’s desired course of action. As TAC forces finalized their deployment in support of OPLAN 312, General LeMay coordinated increased U-2 flights over Cuba, as well as low altitude reconnaissance missions, beginning on 23 October.<sup>33</sup> One event in particular stands out as proof that General LeMay clearly understood the president’s decision for measured and incremental action. As the frequency of U-2 flights increased, the JCS formulated recommendations in the event one of these aircraft was shot down over Cuba. The JCS recommended that in the event of a U-2 loss, the president should continue 1-2 flights daily until another loss occurred.<sup>34</sup> If the president deemed the attrition rate

---

<sup>31</sup> JCS Historical Division, “Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis,” 23-25.

<sup>32</sup> US Department of Defense, “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, October-November 1962: Dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis,” 13. Obtained from the National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

<sup>33</sup> JCS Historical Division, “Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis,” 37.

<sup>34</sup> DoD, “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” 16.

acceptable, the JCS recommended that flights should continue without a United States response.<sup>35</sup> Nowhere in that recommendation did the JCS mention retaliatory strikes against Cuba. Ironically, the president overruled the JCS recommendation because he favored a stronger course of action. In a memorandum to the JCS, the president stipulated that if a U-2 was shot down, he would tend to favor immediate retaliation against the surface-to-air missile site most likely responsible.<sup>36</sup>

When the naval quarantine went into effect the evening of 23 October, General LeMay took on operational responsibilities in addition to his advisory roles on the JCS. The morning of 24 October, the JCS appointed General LeMay to be their executive agent to SAC and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).<sup>37</sup> That same day, the JCS directed SAC to change its alert posture to Defensive Condition (DEFCON) 2 and to initiate a one-eighth airborne alert.<sup>38</sup> Within 24 hours, SAC increased its ready force to 1,436 bombers, 145 ICBMs, and 916 tanker aircraft.<sup>39</sup> While the SAC forces maintained this alert posture, General LeMay worked to ensure the strategic forces were appropriately leveraged. On 25 October, Atlantic Command requested JCS help to identify military capabilities that could aid the Navy's quarantine efforts.<sup>40</sup> General LeMay directed SAC to assist Atlantic Command, and hours later RB-47 aircraft began covering a search area of over a million square miles to assist Navy efforts.<sup>41</sup>

As General LeMay coordinated JCS issues in the days following the president's decision, he had the Air Staff perform resource management

---

<sup>35</sup> DoD, "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 16.

<sup>36</sup> JCS Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," 37; May and Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information, "Cuban Crisis Chronology," 1962, 7, K168.052-1, AFHRA. The overall classification of this report is Secret, although the excerpts used in this thesis were declassified on 12 January 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 12958.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph W. Angell, Jr., *The Air Force Response to the Cuban Crisis*, (Washington DC: USAF Historical Liaison Office, 1963), 8. Obtained from the National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

<sup>39</sup> Angell, *The Air Force Response to the Cuban Crisis*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information, "Cuban Crisis Chronology," 18.

<sup>41</sup> Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information, "Cuban Crisis Chronology," 18.

functions. The staff funneled information from Air Force field commands to General LeMay regarding the recall of munitions and equipment from overseas depots in support of the Cuban contingency.<sup>42</sup> This information helped General LeMay calibrate the ongoing warfighting capability of overseas commands.<sup>43</sup> The Air Staff also disseminated JCS messages to subordinate Air Force commands on DEFCON and readiness changes, and monitored supply levels to ensure sufficient ammunition was available to support the Cuban contingency.<sup>44</sup> While these efforts were important to the success of the contingency, to a large extent the Air Staff served as an oversized command post during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Consistent with his recommendation to the president, General Lemay wanted Air Force combat units in the field to have everything they needed in the event the president called for offensive air strikes against Cuba.

On 27 October, the president nearly did just that. The events of this day provide a great deal of insight into General LeMay's advice to the president and his views as the crisis came to a head. That morning, JCS intelligence briefings confirmed a rapid increase in construction at the Cuban ballistic missile sites, with no evidence of an intention to halt construction or dismantle the sites.<sup>45</sup> Based on this, General LeMay suggested the JCS recommend full-scale air attacks, followed by a ground invasion of Cuba.<sup>46</sup> That afternoon in a meeting at the White House, General Taylor mentioned this recommendation but the commander in chief quickly tabled the notion. Later in that same

---

<sup>42</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *The Air Force Role in Five Crises: 1958-1965* (Washington, DC: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 1968), 47, TS7192, AFHRA. The overall classification of this report is Top Secret, although the excerpts used in this thesis were declassified on 3 February 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 12958.

<sup>43</sup> Nalty, *The Air Force Role in Five Crises*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> Headquarters Air Force, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, "Cuban Chronology Submissions," 1962, C17-C18, TS7192, AFHRA. The overall classification of this report is Top Secret, although the excerpts used in this thesis were declassified on 3 February 2009 in accordance with Executive Order 12958; Angell, *The Air Force Response to the Cuban Crisis*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> JCS Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," 48.

<sup>46</sup> DoD, "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 21.

meeting, word came that a U-2 had been shot down over Cuba. Debate raged in the EXCOM over the appropriate response, but there was no clear consensus.<sup>47</sup> When he returned to the Pentagon, General Taylor recalled the president's edict that a loss of a reconnaissance aircraft would result in retaliatory strikes against the offending SAM site, and asked if the JCS concurred with this action. General LeMay strongly advised against incremental retaliation because it would make the United States open to an attack from Cuba.<sup>48</sup> The general did not favor any type of piecemeal military action when it came to Cuba. These views were not those of a warmonger, but rather the recommendation of someone who is firm in his mind about the proper course of action to resolve the crisis. Whether it was a strength or a weakness, General LeMay's beliefs remained consistent throughout the crisis.

Sunday, 28 October is commonly seen as the day tensions in the Cuban Missile Crisis subsided, but General LeMay's actions show he remained vigilant. Early that morning, he told his fellow joint chiefs that he wanted to go see the president, because intelligence showed that the Soviets were now able to launch 24 MRBMs within 6-8 hours.<sup>49</sup> Although the president did not meet with General LeMay, it is clear that the chief of staff intended to lobby in person for air strikes and an invasion as soon as possible. Later, the announcement came in that the Soviets intended to pack the ballistic missiles in crates and remove them from Cuba.<sup>50</sup>

The news of Soviet capitulation did not immediately dissuade General LeMay, who felt the Soviets intended to make a charade of the withdrawal and keep some weapons in Cuba.<sup>51</sup> As intelligence came in that the Soviets were not moving quickly to remove the missiles, General

---

<sup>47</sup> Stern, *The Week the World Stood Still*, 171-176.

<sup>48</sup> DoD, "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 23.

<sup>49</sup> JCS Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," 52.

<sup>50</sup> Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 202.

<sup>51</sup> DoD, "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 24.

LeMay made continued pushes for air attacks and an invasion.<sup>52</sup> In fact, on 12 November the general once again requested a meeting with the president to advise him the military was at an optimum posture to execute air strikes and a ground invasion.<sup>53</sup> The president met with the JCS on 16 November, and four days later he lifted the naval quarantine of Cuba. General LeMay had remained persistent in his recommendations throughout the crisis, but the president was not convinced.

The consistency of General LeMay's advice throughout the formative days of the crisis and beyond shows he viewed the Cuban Missile Crisis much differently than did President Kennedy. The general saw an opportunity to remove communist influence from Cuba, and took actions during the crisis to ensure military readiness to seize upon this opening.<sup>54</sup> A professional Airman, he fully supported the president's decisions, but never lost sight of the opportunity that the crisis presented and prepared accordingly. A warmonger would have seized upon any opportunity to initiate hostilities, and the stance General LeMay took after the U-2 shootdown on 27 October shows that he was not seeking a fight at any cost or under any condition. Rather, he believed the United States needed to act forcefully and decisively during the Cuban Missile Crisis. President Kennedy did not share his top Airman's view.

#### **After the Crisis: Public Praise**

As the Cuban Missile Crisis subsided, the mood in the White House and the Pentagon turned to one of public satisfaction. As a token of his appreciation for the efforts of key aides involved in the crisis, President Kennedy ordered commemorative silver calendar plaques with the thirteen days of October highlighted. Members of the EXCOM and the president's inner staff received these mementos, as did General

---

<sup>52</sup> DoD, "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," 29.

<sup>53</sup> JCS Historical Division, "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis," 97.

<sup>54</sup> Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 114.

LeMay. In a letter to the president, General LeMay remarked “you and the nation can rely on the Air Force to meet future tests regardless of the magnitude, with equal alacrity and professional competence.”<sup>55</sup> In another example of his appreciation, President Kennedy hosted General LeMay and three Air Force pilots at the White House to thank them for the “wonderful photography” that the Air Force obtained during the crisis.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, it seemed the president felt the Air Force had performed some tasks marvelously during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

General LeMay felt the same way. In an early December 1962 speech, General LeMay reiterated the importance of the Air Force in resolving the crisis. Building upon the president’s 22 October comments that “we will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of world-wide nuclear war...but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced,” General LeMay remarked “I am proud of the way the Air Force performed in the Cuban crisis.” He added “every task assigned Air Force units by the Joint Chiefs and the unified commands was performed without a flaw...all of the tasks were done on time or ahead of time and none of these tasks seriously jeopardized our worldwide commitments.” General LeMay concluded “in a world that invented the term SNAFU to cover what many people expect of a military operation, the ability to do the things I’ve described doesn’t come except from people who are the world’s most experienced and dedicated professional airmen.”<sup>57</sup>

While the chief of staff was justified in his pride in the Air Force, he also mentioned a personal lesson. In an acknowledgement of the challenges he faced as the president’s senior air advisor during the crisis,

---

<sup>55</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay to President John F. Kennedy, letter, 30 November 1962, Box B174, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>56</sup> Brigadier General Richard H. Ellis, executive to the chief of staff, to General Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force chief of staff, memorandum, 29 October 1962, Box B154, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>57</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, “Remarks to 44th Annual Industrial Preparedness Meeting,” (address, New York, 5 December 1962), Box B174, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

General LeMay noted “the orchestration of national military, political, and economic power in emergencies is a changing and delicate art,” adding the “role of defense and its interaction with national policy is becoming more intricate and more difficult to understand.”<sup>58</sup> President Kennedy attempted to make that clear with the establishment of NSAM-55, but it may have taken a national crisis to drive that lesson home for General LeMay.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the Cuban Missile Crisis as it unfolded, one central theme emerges: a lack of a shared perception between General LeMay and President Kennedy as to what the Cuban Missile Crisis offered the United States. General LeMay saw the crisis as an opportunity to rid Cuba of communist influence, while President Kennedy did not see any issue amenable for military resolution at acceptable cost. NSAM-55 set the requirement that the JCS provide advice within a broad context, and General LeMay attempted to do that. The issue, however, was the chief of staff and the president did not share the same view of the situation. Still, General LeMay was not completely ineffective during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The president never discarded General LeMay’s advice, and as time went on, he revisited his senior Airman’s recommendations. General LeMay also did not push for simply any military confrontation in Cuba. Rather, he wanted the president to implement a specific course of action designed to maximize American military advantage. In the end, to be successful in integrating military options, all parties must have a shared understanding of a situation, and this was not the case during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The intricacy and difficulty associated with cohering defense with national policy during times of crisis came to the forefront during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The concluding chapter judges how well General

---

<sup>58</sup> LeMay, “Remarks to 44th Annual Industrial Preparedness Meeting.”



LeMay did in this brave new world, and draws key inferences for strategy formulation today and in the future.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusions

*These brass hats have one great advantage...if we listen to them, and do what they want us to do, none of us will be alive later to tell them that they were wrong.*

- President John F. Kennedy

*President Kennedy always said that he wanted political advice as well as military advice from the joint chiefs, but I think what he really meant was he didn't want any advice at all...I always had the feeling that I was spinning my wheels and anything that I said was not really falling on receptive ears.*

- General Curtis E. LeMay

The Cuban Missile Crisis revealed a chasm between America's senior military and civilian officials. At one end of this gap stood General LeMay, who many cite as the member of the JCS who called the resolution of the crisis "the greatest defeat in our nation's history."<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the divide stood President Kennedy, who remarked after the crisis, "the first advice I'm going to give my successor is to watch the generals and avoid feeling that just because they were military men their opinions on military matters are worth a damn."<sup>2</sup>

The successful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis has obscured some of the negative aspects of the crisis, notably civil-military interaction, and this chapter is an attempt to analyze those failures. It recounts the civil-military gap demonstrated in the Cuban Missile Crisis and suggests ways to mitigate its effects in the future, because gaps between civilian and military leaders serve to make strategy formulation exceedingly difficult. Although this gap is necessarily a function of both

---

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 219. See also Robert S. McNamara and Theodore Sorensen, "13 Days: An Insider's Perspective," (address, Boston, MA, 1 October 2002), JFKL; and Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting 'the Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings*, Stanford Nuclear Age Series (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 385.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin C. Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (New York: Norton, 1975), 122.

civil and military action, this thesis--as well as these conclusions--focuses on one military officer, General LeMay.

### **Discontent in the Wake of the Crisis**

For all the public praise that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, private discontent among the participants lingered long afterward. This is a concern because the relationship between senior military officers and civilian leaders lies at the heart of strategy.<sup>3</sup> Strategy links military power and political purpose, and dissatisfaction between civil and military authority can make discordant what should be harmonized.

The civil-military gap was not a product of disrespect. Some have argued that General LeMay was borderline insubordinate during the 19 October meeting, but President Kennedy seemed unfazed by the chief of staff's aggressive nature.<sup>4</sup> "It's good to have men like Curt LeMay and Arleigh Burke commanding troops once you decide to go in," President Kennedy once noted, "I like having LeMay head the Air Force; everybody knows how he feels...that's a good thing."<sup>5</sup> For his part, General LeMay believed "I am a professional soldier and airman, and professional soldiers and airmen obey orders."<sup>6</sup> Each of these men seemed eminently aware of what Eliot Cohen has termed the "unequal dialogue," where civilian and military leaders "express their views bluntly, indeed, sometimes offensively, and not once but repeatedly," but the "final authority of the civilian leader is unambiguous and unquestioned."<sup>7</sup>

Civilian leaders certainly appreciated General LeMay's leadership and his bluntness, but were concerned about his inability to view events

---

<sup>3</sup> Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 20-23.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 912.

<sup>6</sup> Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 553.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 209.

in a broader context. Secretary McNamara once called General LeMay “the greatest combat commander I met in three years of any service in World War II.”<sup>8</sup> President Kennedy told Carl Kaysen, his Deputy National Security Advisor, that he had General LeMay around “because he knew how to run the Air Force, and if we ever needed an Air Force you’d want a man like that to run it.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, the president told Robert Kennedy that the service chiefs’ inability to look beyond the limited military field disturbed him.<sup>10</sup> President Kennedy preferred what has been described as a fusionist approach to civil-military relations, where military leaders incorporate social, political, and economic factors into their decision-making.<sup>11</sup> General LeMay, for his part, favored a ‘purist’ approach whereby he kept his focus on military matters alone.

The fact that civilian leaders appreciated General LeMay, but did not trust his policy advice, reveals the crux of the issue: civilian leaders did not believe General LeMay based his recommendations on anything other than military factors. Perhaps this is why the president told his advisors that he did not have General LeMay around for his policy inputs, nor did he think much of the recommendations he was going to get from the chief of staff.<sup>12</sup> This feeling seems to have served as a catalyst for the rift between civil and military factions during the Cuban Missile Crisis and long afterwards.

The divide between the military and civil sectors in the wake of the crisis was not limited to those at the head of each branch. As might be expected, Air Force officers who served alongside General LeMay during the crisis tended to back their chief of staff, while civilian participants tended to support the president. Although General LeMay and President

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert S. McNamara and Theodore Sorensen, “Recollecting JFK,” (address, Boston, MA, 22 October 2003), JFKL.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Kaysen, interview by Joseph E. O’Connor, 11 July 1966, transcript, 98, JFKL.

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), 351.

<sup>12</sup> Kaysen, interview by O’Connor, 11 July 1966, transcript, 98.

Kennedy were able to put their differences aside and work together, relationships suffered in the lower echelons of the military and civil branches. The divide becomes even more significant when those beneath the principals harbor feelings that exacerbate the gap between their bosses.

Air Force officers exhibited deep discontent long after the Cuban Missile Crisis was over. Many years later, General McKee thought that “when it comes to a big fiasco, the joint chiefs get the blame for it...when there is a big fiasco at any time, you can be sure that our civilian friends are going to place it on the military.”<sup>13</sup> General Burchinal echoed General McKee. “We could have written our own book” during the Cuban Missile Crisis, he recalled, “but our politicians did not understand what happens when you have such a degree of superiority as we had, or they simply didn’t know how to use it...they were busily engaged in saving face with the Soviets and making concessions.”<sup>14</sup> Taken together, many Air Force officers believed the Kennedy Administration was “very good at putting out brave words, but they didn’t do a bloody thing to back them up.”<sup>15</sup> This feeling persisted despite the opportunity for a significant amount of reflection in the years following the crisis, and it prevailed despite the common wisdom that the peaceful resolution of the crisis was a good thing for the United States.

Civilians who served in the Kennedy Administration shared the discontent of their counterparts in uniform. Robert Kennedy recalled that military officers who met with the president during the crisis “seemed to give so little consideration to the implications of steps they suggested...they seemed to always assume that the Russians or Cubans would not respond, and if they did, that war was in our national

---

<sup>13</sup> General William F. McKee, interview by James C. Hasdorff, 13-14 March 1979, transcript, 124, K239.0512-1118, AFHRA.

<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. Lemay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton*, USAF Warrior Studies, Office of US Air Force History (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1988), 114.

<sup>15</sup> Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 119.

interest.”<sup>16</sup> Speaking forty-five years after the crisis, Theodore Sorensen, one of the president’s closest confidants, reserved particularly stinging criticism for General LeMay. Accounts sometimes “paint Maxwell Taylor as being just like all the other chiefs--not at all,” he remarked, “true, he was a so-called hawk who favored the air strike, but he was a very intelligent, very articulate, very reasonable man; he was not like General LeMay.”<sup>17</sup> Like the military officers who played a role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, it appears that time had not served to soften the strong feelings among the civilian participants.

### **Making Sense of the Evidence: Mitigating the Gap**

The study of General LeMay’s advice to President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis suggests ways military officers might attempt to mitigate the civil-military gap. Understanding one’s own perceptions and comprehending the ways other decision-makers view a particular situation is critical, as is a thorough awareness of the ways in which personal experiences impact a particular policy recommendation. Senior military officers might also use their staffs to assist in critically analyzing a situation. The evidence presented in this thesis reveals instances where General LeMay may not have taken full advantage of these opportunities.

President Kennedy and General LeMay simply did not view the Cuban Missile Crisis in the same way. This is not uncommon, for leaders typically assimilate their perceptions of a situation into their own pre-existing beliefs with little regard for alternative interpretations.<sup>18</sup> In the Cuban Missile Crisis, the president wanted to manage the situation to the maximum extent possible to avoid an escalation into a war with the Soviet Union. General LeMay and the JCS believed this goal to be too

---

<sup>16</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: WW Norton, 1969), 119.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore Sorensen, “The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Eyewitness Perspective,” (address, Boston, MA, 17 October 2007), JFKL.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 409.

modest, because taking action against Cuba in an incremental fashion might well ignite war under conditions disadvantageous to the United States. The joint chiefs strongly believed “somebody’s got to keep [President Kennedy] from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal.”<sup>19</sup>

Future civil and military leaders can avoid the pitfalls that hampered interaction between President Kennedy and General LeMay during the Cuban Missile Crisis. One way to accomplish this is to make one’s own beliefs about a particular situation explicitly known.<sup>20</sup> Eliot Cohen cogently argues that civil leaders must demand a bruising candor from their military advisors, and military officers should not shy away from offering this.<sup>21</sup> General LeMay certainly embraced this responsibility. As part of the civil-military dialogue, however, both factions must also not be timid in expressing the assumptions behind their viewpoint. The evidence suggests that while President Kennedy made clear that he had concerns about a Soviet reaction to American military action in Cuba, he never explicitly told the JCS that he tended to view the situation in Cuba as one that was best resolved via political management rather than direct intervention. General LeMay, for his part, did not explain the underlying rationale for his own recommendation. If the chief of staff had explained more fully to the president that he based his advice on the view that the Cuban Missile Crisis represented an opportunity to remove communist influence from the island without undue risk of wider war, it may have at least opened up a discussion about the validity of his assumptions. To understand another’s position, as well as to ensure others will draw the proper conclusions from one’s own stance, each must try to see the world as the

---

<sup>19</sup> President John F. Kennedy, 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, JFKL. Due to the quality of the audiotape, it is difficult to discern which service chief made this comment. Some authors who transcribed the tape attribute the comment to General Shoup, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, but regardless of who made the remark, it is clear from listening to the tape that General LeMay is in complete agreement.

<sup>20</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 410.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 206.

other sees it.<sup>22</sup> It is not clear that General LeMay or President Kennedy attempted this during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

As the crisis developed, General LeMay's personal experiences played a leading role in the formulation of his advice to the president. This approach is a cause for some concern, because senior leaders often misapply history--even their own--as they grab the first analogy that comes to mind and fail to analyze the specific case to determine the ways it relates to current circumstances.<sup>23</sup> General LeMay appears to have fallen victim to this tendency. He felt extremely confident that the Soviets would not make a move on Berlin if the president approved air strikes, a full blockade, and an invasion of Cuba. This view presumably stemmed in part from the general's experiences during the Berlin Airlift. Yet, the two events were different, not the least because the airlift did not involve lethal force, as would any military action in Cuba. The general's Cuban advice also stemmed from his observations of the crisis in Lebanon in 1958. Yet in Lebanon the Soviets did not have personnel on the ground and the local government was not friendly to the communists.<sup>24</sup> Strategic thinking is necessarily circumstantial thinking, and General LeMay did not seem to contextualize his advice very well.

Senior leaders must analyze personal experiences to ensure the validity of their assumptions. As part of this analysis, they should subject their personal experiences to rigorous examination and attempt to place the experience in proper perspective.<sup>25</sup> General LeMay does not appear to have chosen this course. Although his experiences showed him that political constraints would pervade warfare in the nuclear age, General LeMay maintained his beliefs about the importance of the early

---

<sup>22</sup> Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 409.

<sup>23</sup> Ernest R. May, *"Lessons" Of the Past: the Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), xi.

<sup>24</sup> A. Timothy Warnock, *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations, 1947-1997*, Air Force History and Museums Program (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000), 19-21.

<sup>25</sup> Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 9-11.



use of overwhelming force in any conflict and thus advocated such action during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Likewise, based on his earlier experiences, the general simply did not think the Cuban Missile Crisis would escalate into a broader conflict because Soviet vital national interests were not at stake. In General LeMay's mind, the Cuban Missile Crisis was just another event in the Cold War that required a firm military response. He did not seriously scrutinize the ways President Kennedy's experiences may have led him to contrary judgments.

The Air Staff as an organization fully supported General LeMay during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but the chief of staff did not appear to take full advantage of all the capabilities of his headquarters. If used effectively, staffs can allow for achievement of objectives that are otherwise impossible; they also foster harmonious and united action in solving a problem.<sup>26</sup> General LeMay, however, used his staff primarily as a resource management agency to support operational requirements in the field, and did not ask it to analyze the situation. This was in part the function of the extreme secrecy imposed by the president, in that he prohibited the JCS from discussing the emerging situation in Cuba with their staffs.<sup>27</sup> But it was also a function of General LeMay's proclivities regarding a staff. For him, a military staff existed to amplify and execute a commander's decisions, not inform them.

In the contemporary world, the ability to analyze situations and provide well thought out courses of action is one of the greatest strengths of a headquarters staff. Leaders can rely on their staffs to scan and anticipate the wider environment, to detect variations in their own way of thinking, as well as to question, challenge, and change assumptions.<sup>28</sup> In the Cuban Missile Crisis, General LeMay might have used these

---

<sup>26</sup> Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), 145.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Graham Barlow, *President John F. Kennedy and His Joint Chiefs of Staff* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1981), 205-206.

<sup>28</sup> Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 87.

capabilities, to the extent operational security allowed, to refine his advice to the president. Given General LeMay's character, this may not have made much of an impact. He believed combat experience and judgment were the key variables in solving a problem, and "intellectual smog" and independent analysis were problematic in decision-making.<sup>29</sup> The general's own feelings aside, the Air Staff might have been helpful in framing the Cuban Missile Crisis in light of the way civilian leaders perceived the situation. In the end, if used to their full potential, military staffs can help decipher the most difficult problems and can assist their leaders in placing a given situation in perspective.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The short exchange between President Kennedy and General LeMay on 19 October 1962 personified the challenges linking civil and military authority. General LeMay believed the Cuban Missile Crisis put the president "in a fix" that rested on his shoulders alone. This view aligns closely with the civil-military theory of Samuel Huntington, who argued that "it is not the function of military officers to decide questions of war and peace."<sup>30</sup> President Kennedy, in contrast, held the view that he and his senior Airman shared that burden together, a view more closely aligned with Eliot Cohen's exhortation for an unequal dialogue throughout a crisis.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of their statutory responsibilities, General LeMay was certainly correct. By law, politicians make decisions to wage war, while military commanders fight the nation's battles.<sup>32</sup> Yet, in terms of effective strategy formulation, President Kennedy's views lie closest to the truth. Strategy lies somewhere between the professions of politics and arms, and for that reason alone, both military officers and politicians

---

<sup>29</sup> General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Robert M. Kipp and John T. Bohn, 16 November 1972, transcript, 75, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

<sup>30</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 206.

<sup>32</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 60.

find it difficult to practice.<sup>33</sup> Although he may not have realized it at the time, with the publication of NSAM-55, President Kennedy was essentially asking his senior military advisors to practice the art of strategy. Colin Gray believes “a strategist worthy of the name is a person who sees, even though he or she cannot be expert in, all dimensions of the ‘big picture’ of the evolving conditions of war.”<sup>34</sup> The study of General LeMay’s military advice to President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis highlights the importance of this endeavor.

---

<sup>33</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, Contributions in Military Studies, No. 164 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 236.

<sup>34</sup> Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 52.

## Bibliography

### Books

- Abel, Elie. *The Missile Crisis*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966.
- Allison, Graham T., and Philip Zelikow. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. 2nd edition. New York: Longman, 1999.
- Barlow, Jeffrey Graham. *President John F. Kennedy and His Joint Chiefs of Staff*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1981.
- Bradlee, Benjamin C. *Conversations with Kennedy*. New York: Norton, 1975.
- Coffey, Thomas M. *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1986.
- Cohen, Eliot A. *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime*. New York: The Free Press, 2002.
- Collins, Martin J. *Cold War Laboratory: RAND, the Air Force, and the American State, 1945-1950*, Smithsonian History of Aviation and Spaceflight Series. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002.
- Dobbs, Michael. *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
- Futrell, Robert Frank. *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: A History of Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907-1964*. Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Aerospace Studies Institute, 1971.
- Freedman, Lawrence. *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Gray, Colin S. *Explorations in Strategy*, Contributions in Military Studies, No. 164. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- . *Modern Strategy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Soldier and the State: the Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957.
- Kennedy, Robert F. *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: WW Norton, 1969.
- LeMay, Curtis E., and MacKinlay Kantor. *Mission with LeMay: My Story*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.
- Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- May, Ernest R. *"Lessons" Of the Past: the Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- May, Ernest R., and Philip Zelikow. *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997.

- Miller, Roger G. *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948-1949*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000.
- Morgan, Gareth. *Images of Organization*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997.
- Neustadt, Richard E., and Ernest R. May. *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*. New York: The Free Press, 1986.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- Sorensen, Theodore C. *Kennedy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
- Stern, Sheldon M. *Averting 'the Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings*, Stanford Nuclear Age Series. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- . *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis*, Stanford Nuclear Age Series. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Warnock, A. Timothy. *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations, 1947-1997*, Air Force History and Museums Program. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2000.

### **Memorandums**

- Bundy, McGeorge. To Theodore Sorensen, 8 March 1963, "Decision-Making in the White House." National Security Files, Box 327, John F. Kennedy Library.
- Dillon, C. Douglas. 25 October 1962, "Scenario for Air Strike against Offensive Missile Bases and Bombers in Cuba." National Security Archive, Washington, DC.
- Ellis, Brigadier General Richard H. To General Curtis E. LeMay, 29 October 1962. Box B154, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- Kennedy, President John F. To the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 28 June 1961, "National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 55: Relations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations." National Security Files, Box 330, John F. Kennedy Library.
- LeMay, Lieutenant General Curtis E. To General Lucius Clay, 9 September 1948, "Plan for Protracted Airlift to Berlin." Box B45, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- LeMay, General Curtis E. To Honorable Eugene Zuckert, 5 September 1961. Box B153, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . To commanders at USAF Commander's Conference, 8 March 1962, "USAF's Basic Mission." Box B146, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

McNamara, Robert S. 21 October 1962, "Notes on October 21, 1962, Meeting with the President." National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

### **Recordings**

Kennedy, President John F. 19 October 1962, Item 31.2, Meeting Recordings, Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy Library.

### **Interviews**

- Creech, General Wilbur L. Interview by Hugh N. Ahmann, 1 June 1992. Transcript, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- Ellis, General Richard H. Interview by Edgar F. Puryear, 19 June 1979. Transcript, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- Fairbrother, Brigadier General William H. Interview by Martin J. Miller, Jr., and Joseph P. Ventolo, Jr., 7 June 1974. Transcript, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- Kaysen, Carl. Interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, 11 July 1966. Transcript, John F. Kennedy Library.
- Kohn, Richard H. and Joseph P. Harahan. *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton*, USAF Warrior Studies, Office of Air Force History. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1988.
- LeMay, General Curtis E. Interview by John T. Bohn, 9 March 1971. Transcript, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- . Interview by Robert F. Futrell, Thomas G. Belden, and J. Van Staaveren, 8 June 1972. Transcript, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- . Interview by Robert M. Kipp and John T. Bohn, 16 November 1972. Transcript, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- McKee, General William F. Interview by James C. Hasdorff, 13-14 March 1979. Transcript, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- McNamara, Robert S. Interview by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., April 4, 1964. Transcript, John F. Kennedy Library.

## **Manuscript Collections**

- LeMay, General Curtis E. To Honorable James H. Douglas, Chairman of Committee to Consider Structure of Joint Chiefs of Staff, letter, 22 August 1962. Box B148, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . Box B154, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . October 1962 Appointment Book. Box B177, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . To President John F. Kennedy, letter, 30 November 1962. Box B174, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

## **Lectures and Addresses**

- LeMay, Major General Curtis E. “Military Science and National Security.” Address. Cleveland, OH, 8 October 1946. Box B44, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . “Remarks Scheduled for 11 April 1947.” Address. Washington, DC, 11 April 1947. Box B44, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- LeMay, General Curtis E. “Air Force Policy Pertaining to Limited War.” Address. 9 April 1957. Box B71, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . “Remarks before the Committee of One Hundred.” Address. Miami, FL, 16 March 1959. Box B171, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . “Remarks to the Naval War College.” Address. Newport, RI, 10 April 1962. Box B175, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . “Remarks to Air Staff Orientation.” Address. Washington, DC, 18 September 1962. Box B174, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- . “Remarks to 44th Annual Industrial Preparedness Meeting.” Address. New York, 5 December 1962. Box B174, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- McNamara, Robert S., and Theodore Sorensen. “13 Days: An Insider’s Perspective.” Address. Boston, MA, 1 October 2002. John F. Kennedy Library.
- . “Recollecting JFK.” Address. Boston, MA, 22 October 2003. John F. Kennedy Library.

- Sorensen, Theodore. "The Olive Branch or the Arrows." Address. New York, 18 April 1963. National Security Files, Box 327A, John F. Kennedy Library.
- . "The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Eyewitness Perspective." Address. Boston, MA, 17 October 2007. John F. Kennedy Library.
- Truman, President Harry S. "Reading copy of message to Congress re: Greece and Turkey." Address. Washington, DC, 12 March 1947. 1945-1953 Presidential Speeches-Originals, Speech File, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

### **History and Historical Studies**

- Angell, Jr., Joseph W. *The Air Force Response to the Cuban Crisis*. Washington DC: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 1963.
- Hildreth, Charles H. *USAF Logistics Preparations for Limited War: 1958-1961*. Washington, DC: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 1962.
- History. United States Atlantic Command, *CINCLANT Historical Account of Cuban Crisis*, 1963.
- Nalty, Bernard C. *The Air Force Role in Five Crises: 1958-1965*. Washington, DC: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 1968.

### **Reports**

- Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Headquarters Air Force. "Cuban Chronology Submissions." 1962. US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, Headquarters Air Force. "Cuban Chronology Submissions." 1962. US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- Historical Division, Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Chronology of JCS Decisions Concerning the Cuban Crisis." Report no. SM-1451-62, 1962. National Security Archive, Washington, DC.
- Tactical Air Command. "AFLANT OPLAN 312 Planning Factors: Operations, Communications, Logistics, Personnel." 1962. US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information. "Cuban Crisis Chronology." 1962. US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.
- US Department of Defense. "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, October-November 1962: Dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis." 1962. National Security Archive, Washington, DC.



Westover, Lieutenant General Charles B. "A Highly Compressed Narrative Account and Assessment of the Tactical Air Command and the Cuban Crisis." Response to Air Force Historical Division Liaison Office, 1963. US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.